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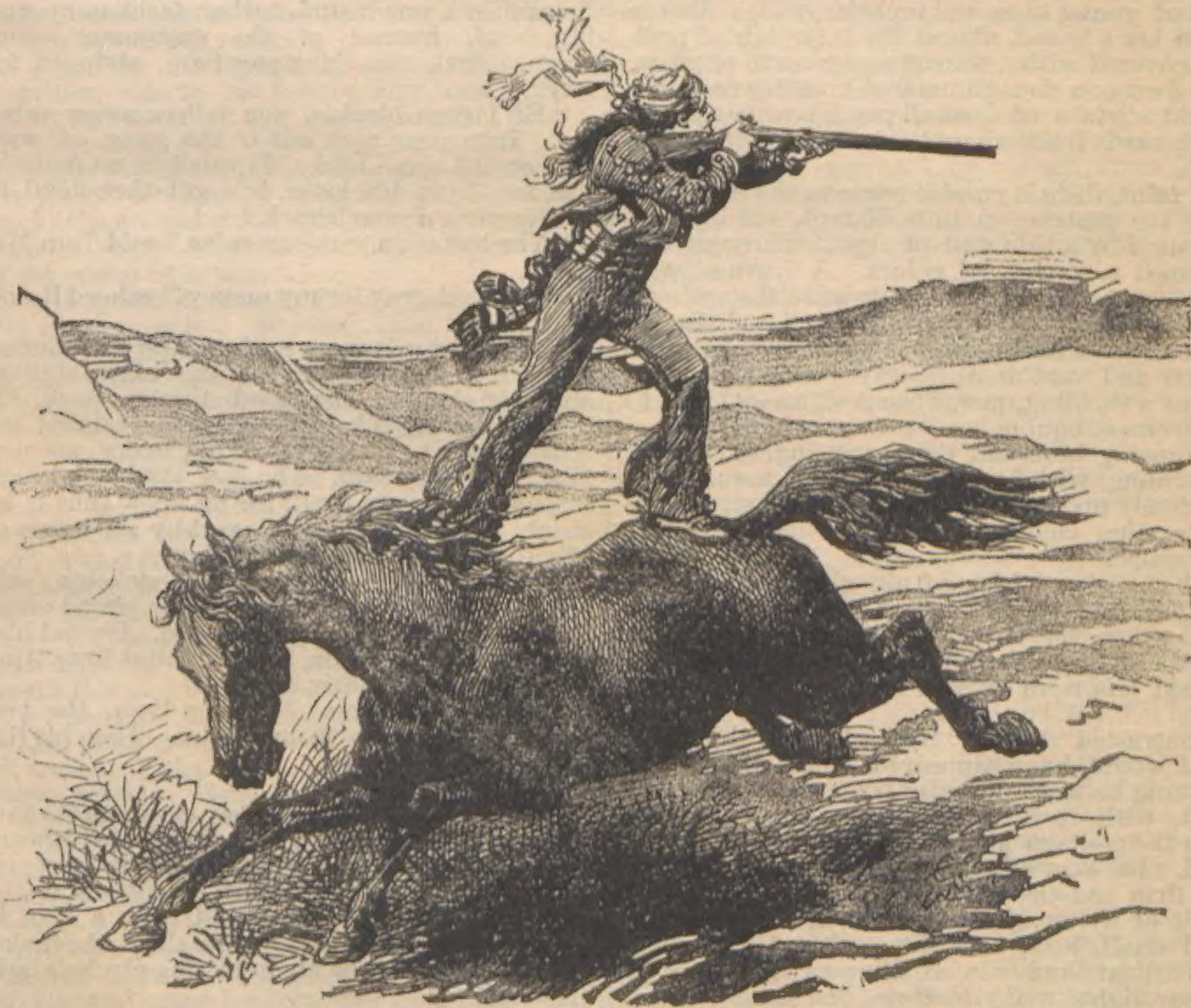
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Mustang Sam, the King of the Plains.

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UTTERING HIS WILD SLOGAN, THE MAD RIDER AGAIN CIRCLED ROUND THE CAVALCADE, THE BEAU
IDEAL OF A DASHING PLAINSMAN.

Mustang Sam,

THE KING OF THE PLAINS.

A ROMANCE OF APACHE LIFE.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "YELLOWSTONE JACK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE DESERT KING AND HIS MASTER.

"YENDER they come, an' this time the's no foolin'. See! blackie's in the lead!"

"Thar's none got a better right, I don't reckon. But he's my meat, this time, er I'll swaller Comanche, ha'r, hide, tail an' all. But hist! Keep ready, and wait ontel I squeel."

"It seems a pity to do it," half-regretfully muttered the third man, the youngest of the trio.

"Pity your gran'daddy! That critter is the only one 'at ever showed his heels to Comanche, since I've rid him, an' I'm goin' to own the varmint, ef I have to take an' run him down on foot. You mark me!"

Three men were standing beside their saddled and bridled horses, just within the edge of a belt of young trees and undergrowth. Before them lay a broad, almost level stretch of prairie, covered with a thin, sparse growth of grass. The forenoon sun glimmered brightly from the placid surface of a small pond, scarcely three-score yards from where the hunters were in ambush.

A faint, distant rumble came to the ear from over the prairie. A mile distant, the air was obscured by a thin veil of dust. Through this gleamed a variety of colors. A drove of wild horses were slowly trotting toward the spring.

The eyes of the hunters glistened and flashed with eager admiration as the mustangs came nearer and were more plainly seen. And truly it was a thrilling, magnificent sight—a treat to all lovers of equine beauty and perfection.

Prancing here and there, trotting, curveting, caracoling, with luxuriant tail and mane floating freely upon the light breeze, their strangely-contrasting colors formed an ever-shifting kaleidoscope.

At their head, king of all, glided a jet-black stallion, a small white star marking his forehead, whenever the silky forelock was lifted by the air. Upon this animal the eyes of the ambushed trio were riveted with longing admiration.

Contrasted with a "States horse," the black chief would have appeared small, but for a mustang he was unusually large and powerfully built, with *race* in every line of him, united with the courage and endurance of a thoroughbred. Its skin shining and soft as satin, with the firm muscles quivering beneath like a network of living vines, with each motion; the head small, lean, racer-like, "blood" all over; ears delicate and pointed, almost transparent in a clear light; well ribbed-up, fine shoulders, admirable girth and loins; legs clean, slender, firm, with superb knee-action; these were the

points that the three men noticed as the wild *mustenos* neared the prairie spring, following the black king in lines as regular as those of trained cavalry.

"I'll have that beauty this day, or my name isn't Mustang Sam!" breathed one of the men, his eyes flashing, his teeth set close.

"'Twon't take long to tell the tale now, onless they smell us."

"The wind's from them to us—ha! hold your critter's nose, Tom—ef he gives voice now, our game's played!" hastily muttered Mustang Sam, as one of the animals tossed its head impatiently, its nostrils quivering as though about to send forth a challenging neigh.

With hands tightly compressing the nostrils of their animals, two of the men stood eagerly waiting the moment of action. Not so Mustang Sam. He knew that his well-trained horse would not give the alarm, and without so much as rustling the leaves around, he leaped into the saddle. Raising the plaited rope of horse-hair, he was ready for the chase.

Strapped to the saddle was his short, heavy repeating rifle. Upon either hip rested a revolver, "navy size;" stout buckskin thongs were attached to the lower end of the scabbards, and then t ed to the hunter's thigh, thus preventing their flapping around, as well as securing the weapons from falling out. A scarlet scarf of Spanish silk was bound, turban-fashion, around his head, instead of the customary sombrero. Such was Mustang Sam, stripped for work.

"Ef I rope blackie, you fellers never mind me. Take your pick out o' the gang, an' wait here until I come back. It won't be no fool o' a job, fer, from his looks, he's got ther devil in 'im bigger'n a woodchuck."

"The buckskin yender's mine," said Tom McKoun.

"The steel-gray for my money!" echoed Ralph Weston.

No more words were spoken, and the hunters fairly held their breath as the black stallion abruptly halted, his head thrown back, his blood-red nostrils loudly sniffing the tainted air. A cold sweat started out from every pore of Mustang Sam's skin, as he saw the black king's suspicions were aroused, for he knew that if he should take to flight now, good-by all hopes of effecting his capture on that day.

After several moments of this sickening suspense, the desert-king lowered his proud crest, and trotted quietly up to the pond. Around him crowded the cavallada, in their thirst forgetting their half-awe of their king.

At a glance from Mustang Sam, the two hunters leaped into their saddles. Then his lips parted.

"Now!"

With the speed of an arrow, chestnut Comanche parted the leafy screen and darted toward the pond. At the thunder of hoofs, the *mustenos* started, turning their heads in confusion and alarm. But before they could raise a hoof in flight, Mustang Sam was upon them, the snake-like lasso cutting the air in hissing circles above his head.

Uttering one shrill scream, the black stallion rose into the air, crossing the pond with one

mighty bound, hurling aside the animals that obstructed his way, rolling several in the mud and water. Yet, swift and strong though he was, he could not escape his fate.

The flexible rope-snake shot through the air—the dark coils settled fairly around the proud neck—Comanche flung himself back upon his haunches; a heavy shock—a sharp *twang* of the rope—and then the desert king lay humbled upon the edge of the pond, quivering in every fiber.

"Houp-la! glory to Jerusalem! the critter's mine at last!" yelled Mustang Sam, in an ecstasy of delight.

At a touch of the heavy Spanish spurs, Comanche leaped forward crossing the pond like a bird, standing over the black king, snorting proudly. With eyes only for his noble captive, Mustang Sam leaped to the ground, freeing the lasso from his saddle.

Loosening the tightly-drawn noose, Mustang, with practiced celerity, formed a "bow-stall" upon the stallion.

This was the work of scarcely twenty seconds, yet Mustang Sam was none too quick. The black stallion began to struggle to his feet, though still unsteady from the effects of the stunning fall. But the hunter was ready for him.

With a shrill, triumphant cry, Mustang Sam twitched upon the bow-stall, at the same time applying the cruel rawhide *quirt* to the animal's quarters. As though stung into fresh life, the stallion rose to his feet, wildly tossing its head to rid itself of the uncomfortable bow-stall.

A single catlike leap, and Mustang Sam was fairly seated astride the desert king. For one moment the animal stood motionless, as though carved in ebony, surprise seemingly depriving it of the power of action.

Then it squatted close to the ground, quivering in every muscle. Mustang Sam tightened the gripe of his knees, and waited. He was not long kept in suspense.

With a shrill scream like that of a maddened beast, the stallion leaped fully twenty feet forward, then pausing, turned its head, and tried to tear the rider from its back with white, gleaming teeth. Once, twice, Mustang Sam flung forward his moccasined feet, and the blood trickled from the horse's lips.

Screaming with rage and pain, the stallion reared upright, until it seemed about to fall backward upon its rider. With a wild, ringing laugh, Mustang passed one arm around the animal's throat, his feet locked around its body. For a moment this; then the horse bounded forward, flinging up its heels in a succession of mad, furious kicks. But rapid as were those changes, Mustang Sam appeared fully equal to the occasion. At times he lay back to back with the stallion, his feet thrust beneath the animal's forelegs; at others upright, like an equestrian statue; at others embracing the horse's neck with his arms.

Abruptly changing its tactics, the animal lay down and rolled over and over; but Mustang Sam alighted upon his feet, still clutching the lasso, and plying the *quirt* with cutting force. The stallion snorted fiercely as he leaped to his

feet, but with the same motion, Mustang occupied his former position.

It was an exhibition of mad animal rage, and cool adroitness upon the hunter's part. There was only one spectator. The wild horses had fled, and were now a mile distant. Tom McKoun had captured his buckskin, but his lasso broke, and the mustang escaped. Cursing his ill-luck, the old hunter hastened to assist Ralph Weston, who had found his match in the steel-gray. Comanche alone remained near his master, prancing around, snorting excitedly, his eyes flashing, mane and tail floating upon the breeze. He had been well trained, and knew well the part that was expected of him. The black stallion tries to throw down his head again, but now Sam takes the offensive. A vigorous pull upon the bow-stall shuts off the breath of life, and in a moment the head lifts, gasping, half choked. Up still higher, until the forefeet paw the air wildly, and it seems as though the horse means to fall over backward and crush its rider. Fall it does, but not of its own accord. A sharp jerk of the bow-stall overbalances him, and he falls heavily: but, wary and active as a panther, Mustang Sam leaps aside and stands "clear of all." Swiftly falls the rawhide parting the quivering skin, stinging sharply. Screaming with pain the maddened desert king leaps to his feet; and at the same moment Mustang Sam vaults lightly upon its back. Once more the *quirt* falls; it produces the desired effect. The stallion stretches out his noble frame in full speed, as a last resource, seeking to run away from the terrible incumbrance upon its back. A shrill whistle is answered by a neigh from Comanche, and the noble chestnut stretches out in swift pursuit. And Mustang Sam laughs loudly every nerve thrilling with a wild, delirious intoxication.

The landscape sweeps past with the rapidity of thought, all objects blending together; air cuts the face sharply, bringing water into even the trained eyes of the mad rider. Yet even in that moment Mustang Sam yelled aloud with a peculiar joy as he realized the value of this horse; in that moment the faithful Comanche lost the place so long maintained in the heart of his master, for here was a rival still swifter of foot than he.

Cool and wary, Mustang Sam closely watched his captive, keeping a gentle yet firm strain upon the bow-stall, with knees pressing the animal's ribs, and toes well turned in. With his body slightly bent forward the rider was ready for any sudden balk or trick of the horse. But this did not come. Evidently the stallion had had enough of such tactics.

On with mad haste the black stallion thundered, every muscle strained to its utmost tension; on through the brightly-glowing sun; on over the level stretch of dry, parched, almost grassless plain, a long line of dust marking its progress.

To the left, this level plain, almost a desert, extended as far as the naked eye could reach. To the right, several miles away, the ground grew rough and broken, fantastic piles rising in wild confusion, one overtopping the other, some gloomy, others beautiful, not a few gigantic

burlesques. This was the country that bordered the San Juan.

Already half a dozen miles had been traversed by the wild king, and now Mustang Sam found himself close upon the heels of the *mustenos*. Here within reach of his lasso were a score of untamed beauties, any of them well worth a cast of the horse-hair rope; but the hunter well knew that he had his hands full already.

With neighs and snorts of terror, the mustangs broke and scattered upon either side, evidently not recognizing their leader in this strangely deformed racer. Mustang Sam cast one anxious glance behind him; he had not time for more. He saw that Comanche was coming gallantly on, though full a quarter of a mile in the rear.

The stallion began to chafe and falter in its headlong course, eying the mustangs as they scattered before him. Then, with a sudden, sidelong leap, it changed its course. The stifling bow-stall tightened, the quirt descended upon its flanks with the crack of a pistol, the huge spurs pressed rankling into its ribs. Screaming aloud with pain, rage and terror, the stallion once more bounded forward.

"At the p'int ahead I reckon I kin manidge him," muttered Mustang Sam, calculatingly.

Half a dozen miles ahead was the point alluded to. Here the high ground, irregular and jagged, sent a sharp spur far out into the plain; a promontory, stretching into the sea of the desert. From its extreme point, one standing upon the crest could drop a stone to the plain, five hundred feet below.

Nearer and nearer, until the jagged points and yawning seams in the rocks could be quite plainly seen, and still the stallion gave no token of tiring, but glided on with the same marvelously swift steadiness. And a mile in the rear came Comanche, no doubt astonished, yet unconquered.

A little cry breaks from the lips of the mad rider, and with one hand he shaded his eyes, peering eagerly toward the stupendous piles of rocks. Distinctly outlined against the gray masses, he could now see a number of human beings mounted upon horseback. One of them appeared to be waving a blanket at him; but then a point of rock shut them from his sight.

"Who in thunder kin *they* be up thar? They must be ridin' mounting goats, I reckon. Whites, too, it looked like—"

The soliloquy was ab uptly broken, an unconscious curse parting the hunter's lips. He had rounded the point of rocks, but further advance seemed certain death. The road was blocked; the obstacle nearly a hundred mounted Apache warriors, in the full glory of paint, feathers and helmets, their lance-points glistening ominously in the sunlight.

There was no time for deliberation; one had to act as if by instinct. Even had the stallion attempted it, he could not have halted or turned aside before coming into collision with the Indians. This, however, it did not attempt. Terror and pain had rendered it mad, and stretched out like a race-horse, it carried Mustang Sam blindly into the midst of his enemies.

It was evident that the Apaches were fully as surprised as our friend. The dust and sand of

the prairie had deadened the sound of hoof-strokes. With confused cries they separated to the right and left, giving way before the mad rider, evidently believing him the leader of a desperate band of like warriors.

After one ineffectual twitch upon the bow-stall, Mustang Sam dropped the coiled lasso beneath his knees, and whipped forth a revolver in either hand.

It was a thrilling sight, that one man charging upon fully one hundred thoroughly armed Apaches, and seemed certain death. The revolvers spoke rapidly, Mustang not attempting to take aim, and, indeed, in those densely crowded masses, there was little need. A bullet could scarcely fail of finding its billet there, and shrill death-yells were added to the panorama.

A wild, shrill neigh from beyond the hill point served to confirm the suspicions of the Apaches, and, with a yell of warning, they prepared for the collision, scarce heeding the horseman as he tore through their ranks, marking his passage with blood.

A moment later Comanche burst round the point, and with a wild neigh charged after his master. At nearly the same moment a warrior gained a point from which the plain below was visible, and his yell told the Apaches the truth; that no other enemies were within sight.

Resistlessly the black stallion tore through the Apaches, and aided by the death-dealing revolvers, soon gained the open plain beyond. The firing, the horrible yells and screeches, added to what had gone before, fairly maddened the stallion. With redoubled speed he ran on, straight and true as the flight of a rifle-bullet, swift as the passage of a wild pigeon. He was now entirely beyond the hunter's control. During the brief skurry with the Apaches, while both Mustang's hands were occupied with the pistols, the noose around the stallion's nose had shaken free, and only the head-stall remained. As well hope to stay a prairie fire with bonds of grass, as to check the mad horse with that.

Yet it could not be said that Mustang Sam felt fear, as he realized this, for such a sentiment was foreign to his nature. From childhood he had played with death, and it had no terror for him.

He saw Comanche fighting furiously in the midst of the war-party, biting and kicking with deadly force, screaming with rage and fury at being kept from his master; and then he saw the snake-like coils of a dozen lassoes, as the noble brute was thrown heavily to the ground, and a bitter curse hissed through his teeth.

"I'll make 'em sick for that, or my name ain't Mustang Sam!" he gritted, angrily. "They're follerin' us. Wal, let 'em. I'd run a race with the lightnin' on this critter!"

Even with the hard and exhausting fight, the long race that the stallion had already undergone, Mustang Sam believed that he could distance the fastest animal among the Apaches. Still an accident might change the aspect of affairs, and none knew this better than he. His keen, quick eye picked out the safest route, and by swaying his body to one side compelled the stallion to follow his wishes to preserve its balance. And thus for a full hour the race continued.

At the end of that time the Apaches were mere specks in the distance, though evidently still in pursuit. The black horse still raced on, apparently as rapidly as at first.

Mile after mile was swiftly traversed, and the black hide of the horse was now white with foam and sweat. The Apaches were no longer visible; they were left far in the rear, if, indeed, they had not long since abandoned the pursuit as hopeless.

Mustang Sam began to grow uneasy.

The lasso was useless as far as the head-stall was concerned, but Mustang doubled the slack and thus formed a noose, which he cast over the animal's head. Then, bracing himself, he pulled steadily. Almost insensibly the animal's speed slackened. The noose was choking him.

So busily had Mustang Sam been employed in this that when he glanced up a cry of astonishment broke from his lips. Scarce a mile distant he could distinguish the clumsy forms and white tilts of a number of wagons; evidently a wagon-train.

These had halted, and Mustang could distinguish a number of men running to and fro as if in confusion. Despite his fatigue he smiled grimly, and resolved to astonish the natives.

"I'll make 'em open thar eyes wider'n that," he muttered, as he slackened the noose. "I kin manidge the critter well enough fer that, I reckon."

And bending forward, he uttered a wild yell close to the ear of the foam-covered animal. Like an arrow it darted forward.

CHAPTER II.

HORNETS OF THE PRAIRIE.

SWAYING his body to one side as he neared the wagon-train, Mustang Sam caused the stallion to circle round the white-tilted vehicle, and then went through all the tricks and feats of the Apache and Comanche Indians, exhibiting a skill that was fairly marvelous, considering that he rode a horse without either saddle or bridle. The emigrants followed his every motion with wondering eyes, until Mustang pulled up the now completely exhausted and subdued animal.

"Ef you're through with your tomfoolery, stranger, mebbe you'll come in an' tell us what the devil you're drivin' at," quietly called out a grizzled teamster.

"*Houp-la!*" yelled Mustang Sam, urging his horse once more around the train, yelling and screeching like a mad Apache; then, pausing before the teamster, he lightly sprung to his feet upon the black stallion.

"You ax who I be. I'm Mustang Sam, the *high muck-a-muck* of E Pluribus Unum! I was got by a bull whale out o' a iceberg. I kin yell louder, run fuder, ride faster, shoot straighter, jump higher, tell bigger lies, eat more poor bull an' jump outside o' more chain-lightnin' than any other two-legged critter that ever drew breath. I'm Mustang Sam—how goes it, stranger?"

Abruptly terminating his gasconading, the hunter leaped to the ground and advanced toward the wagon, a pleasant smile upon his face. Although a few eyed him with evident suspicion,

the majority crowded around him with eager curiosity.

"You are welcome, stranger, though you make your appearance in rather a strange style," said the leader of the wagon-train—a handsome, stalwart man in the prime of life.

"I've jest been taming me a new horse. He's tuck me nigh seventy-five miles sence stoppin' to breathe. Jest look at him. Ain't he a perfect pictur'?" and Mustang Sam cast an admiring glance toward the black stallion, who stood motionless as though carved from stone, though the lasso hung free and unsecured.

"Indeed he's a beauty; but you've ridden him hard."

"I had to do it. He had the devil in 'im, bigger'n a woodchuck. Then I run slap-bang into a hornets' nest on the road. An' that makes me think—what's up that you're stoppin' here? Waitin' for the Apaches to come a'ter your skulps?"

"We're waitin'—yes, but not for the Apaches. Some of our company rode away to the hills, yonder, and have not yet returned," replied the leader with a troubled air.

"You won't see 'em back this day, then; lucky if you ever see 'em ag'in," tersely added Mustang Sam.

"What do you mean—what do you know of them?" cried the emigrant, his bronzed face turning a shade paler.

"The Apaches won't let 'em. No—I don't mean *that*. They ain't ketched yit, as I know on, but they will be if they 'tempts to j'ine you in daylight. A horned frog couldn't pass the red imps now, unseen. It's rough, but that's the truth, stranger."

"Mebbe you know more'n you keer to tell," muttered a stout teamster, suspiciously. "They say thar's more'n one white devil as consorts wi' the 'Patchies."

"I know that I went through what'd make you shake your toe-nails off with fear, Beauty," sneered Mustang Sam, his eyes filling with a dangerous fire. "But I'll tell you, stranger, for you look like a white man. You see, I gripped this critter, an' backed it at once. He fit hard and kerried me a long way. On the road he runned slap-bang into a full hundred Apaches, rigged out in thar war-paint. I couldn't dodge 'em, so drew my pups an' went in fer all I's worth. I dropped two or three, then blackie kerried me clean through 'em. They follered, but couldn't shine 'th us. The last I see'd o' them, they were still a-follerin'. Mebbe they air yit, mebbe they've giv' it up as a bad job. But either way, be sure o' this—nobody cain't leave them hills on this side to-day an' not be picked up by them imps. Now you know what I meant."

"Do you think they are after the train?"

"I don't know. They're loungin' 'long the trail, lookin' fer some sech snap, I don't doubt. You must 'a' turned aside a good bit ago. The main trail's good ten mile from this," thoughtfully replied Sam; then he started, a recollection breaking upon his mind.

"Thar! I've seen your fri'nds! They're—or war—all of thirty miles from here, an' within a mile o' whar I started up the Apaches. One feller waved a blanket at me. I didn't know

what fer, then, but I do now. He must 'a' knowed the Apaches war jest acrost the hill, an' wanted to warn me."

"Did you see her—were they all there alive and safe?"

"Her—thar warn't any wimmen along, war thar?"

"My daughter was one of the party; and this man's child, too," replied the wagon boss, yet with a strained calmness that was unnatural and only the more plainly betrayed his anxiety.

"An' you let her go? You look like you had more sense!"

"We didn't dream of danger. We hadn't seen any sign of Indians for a week past. Everything seemed quiet."

"Jest the time you want to keep your eyes skinned the widest."

"Well, it is done, and talking won't help matters. But there may be yet time to save them. Stranger, will you guide me to where you saw them?" hurriedly asked the emigrant.

"Alone?"

"No—I know there will be plenty of volunteers in such a cause. You hear, my lads. Will you ride with me to save our friends?"

One or two voices replied in the affirmative, but for the most part silence reigned. The eyes of the emigrant flashed angrily.

"I thought I led men, not cowards!"

"Easy, stranger—they're right, an' you wrong. It'd take the hull lot to ride through the Apaches, an' then what'd come of the train? I don't count my life any better than the next man, but I won't lead you on no such fool trip as that."

"Then I'll go alone!"

"An' throw away your own life, as well as knockin' on the head what little chainece your gal has of escapin'. D'you think the Apaches is fools? Wouldn't they see that it wasn't fer nothin' common that you was leaving the train in the face o' sech danger? That'd set 'em lookin' in the way your face was set. An' once they strike the trail of your gal, the devil himself couldn't choke 'em off afore they captured her. No. Your place is here, to help defend the train. This night won't pass by without your hearin' from the 'Patchies. In follerin' me, they must 'a' struck your trail. You kin easy guess the rest," reasoned Mustang Sam.

"He is right, old friend," said the man indicated as the one whose child had also left the train; a white-haired, venerable patriarch. "We can do nothing now; and our dear ones are in the hands of an all-wise God!"

"Thar's sound sense, anyhow," said Mustang. "But, come; gear up. I'll show ye a better place to withstand the Apaches than this. Why all they'd hev to do would be to surround you here, an' starve ye out. Three miles further on is good water an' plenty grass, with a sound back-work besides."

The words of the plainsman produced the desired effect, and a few minutes later the wagon-train was moving steadily along over the hot, dusty level. And then Mustang Sam gleaned the following facts from Edward Bland, the leader of the little wagon-train.

The latter had been trading at Santa Fe, when the gold-fever broke out in California.

For over a year he resisted the inclination he felt to exchange this slow, methodic life for the one where a fortune might be made in a single day; for such were the stories told of the fabulous riches of El Dorado. But a sudden and disastrous blow deprived him of nine-tenths of his riches, and he resolved to put the rest into a couple of wagons and start overland for the mines. A train was being made up by several of his acquaintances, and he thought the chance too good to be lost. His daughter Edith would not consent to being left behind, and he could not resist her pleadings, the last of all his loved ones, though he knew that the overland trail was thick-strewn with danger and privation. And the fact of Thomas Heflin taking with him his daughter Ellen, helped him to decide in Edith's favor.

Thus far the journey had been a monotonous one; nothing had been seen of hostile Indians. They were now on the western side of the Sierra de Chuska, in the wild, almost barren country over which Fort Defiance stands remote sentry; the raiding-ground of four great and warlike tribes. On the north dwelt the Utes; the Navajoes on the west; the Apaches on the south; and the Comanches on the east. The country was broken with yawning canyons, thousands of feet in depth. In places the scenery was grand—sublime. The hand of nature had eclipsed the grandest conceptions of architectural man.

This, too, was the traditional land of the children of the sun; the land of the Montezumas—of the mound-builders; the land where were to be found the remarkable *Casas Grandes*.

The night before, the wagon-train halted within sight of what appeared to be one of those mammoth ruins, and Edith Bland could not rest until assured that she should visit the spot. With the first light of day, the little party set out on horseback, four in number: Edith and Ellen, accompanied by Captain Tom Day, an officer of the regular army, on extended leave, and Arthur Hamilton. The train moved slowly on, and the quartette were expected to rejoin it long before noon. At length growing uneasy at their protracted absence, the ruins having long been lost sight of, the wagon-train was halted. At this point Mustang Sam joined them, as narrated.

"Hyar's the place I meant," at length cried Mustang, dismounting from the black stallion, that now followed his every step with the meek docility of a spaniel.

A huge mass of granite stood upon the plain, gray and bare. From its base gushed forth a spring of clear, cold water, forming a miniature pond, then flowing away, to be quickly absorbed by the thirsty sands of the desert. Upon three sides the rock, or, in prairie parlance, the *mesa*, was perpendicular as the sides of a house. The fourth—that upon which was the spring—was several feet narrower at the base than the top.

The wagons were drawn up in a double line, bending outward like a bow, either end resting firmly against the rock. Willing hands plied pick and shovel, and the wheels were let down into ruts cut for the purpose, until the axles rested on the ground. The dirt thus removed

was used to form a breastwork along the barricade, behind which the emigrants could lie and fire upon the enemy. The horses were fastened inside the corral; the mules securely tethered without, as it was not likely the Apaches would wantonly slaughter them as long as a chance remained of their succeeding in capturing the train, as that would be but to rob themselves.

By the time these preparations were completed the sun was low down the western horizon. As yet nothing had been seen of either friends or foes. If the Apaches had indeed discovered the trail of the wagon-train, they were waiting for the shades of night to cover their approach.

"Ef you'll lend me your critter, Bland, an' I kin git him over this, I'll take a ride out to see what kin be seen. I'll leave blackie as security," laughed Mustang Sam.

"Take him and welcome. Pray God that you may learn something of my child," earnestly replied the emigrant.

"Pray that they've kept to the hills, instead, fri'nd. Jest as sure as they ventur' out on the open afore night, they'll be cabbaged by them devils. But ef they lay low ontel we've whipped the imps, they'll stand a good show of gittin' in. But here goes; I'll be back by dusk," and Mustang Sam galloped swiftly away.

"Good-by your pet hoss, boss," growled the swart teamster. "I b'lieve he's no better'n a hoss-thief, fer all his fine airs."

"I'd gladly lose the horse, if I could only know that his story was all a lie; but I feel it is the truth," gloomily responded Bland.

The hours dragged wearily enough to the anxiously-waiting emigrants, and as the sun sunk to rest, and the shades of night fast deepened around them, without bringing the stranger back, suspicion gradually gained ground. But this was dissipated by the return of Mustang Sam, at length.

He said that he had taken the back trail to the point where he had first joined the train, then followed up his own tracks. From this he had found where the Apaches had abruptly struck over to the wagon-trail. By close creeping, leaving his horse hidden in a ravine, he had reconnoitered the bivouac of the Apaches. Though beyond ear-shot, he knew from their actions that they meant to attack the wagon train before another sun rose.

"Let 'em come!" he said, grimly. "They'll go back 'th a flea in thar ear—at least, some o' them. We kin flax 'em easy. All we have to do is to lay low an' fire close."

With such words of careless confidence he nerved the few faint-hearted ones, until even they appeared ready and eager for the fray.

The moon sunk behind the mesa, the four-footed animals dozed placidly at their posts, and still the enemy did not come. The more inexperienced emigrants began passing their jokes and gibes, as they lay in the damp ditch. But Mustang Sam only smiled quietly. He knew that the hour was steadily, if slowly, drawing nigh, when all this would be changed.

"Thar's somethin' creepin' up out thar—either a coyote or a red-skin," muttered Sweatman, the surly teamster.

"You've got good eyes, my man," said Mus-

tang Sam, approvingly. "It's a two-legged coyote, and hot for hair. Mebbe he'll get shaved hisself, instead o' shavin' us."

Drawing his knife, Mustang silently writhed his way through the barricade, and stealthily glided toward the creeping figure. He saw it abruptly pause, and knew that he was discovered. Without hesitating a moment, Mustang veered slightly to one side, his face turned partially away from the shadow, though with a sidelong glance his keen eyes took in every motion of the spy. The Apache evidently believed himself unseen, and closely hugged the ground as Mustang glided on.

Then, with a sidelong leap, Sam alighted fairly upon the red-skin's shoulders, driving his head deep into the dry sand. And the next moment the long-bladed knife was crimsoned in the Indian's heart's blood.

But swift and deadly as was the blow, a half-stifled death-shriek burst from the red-skin's lips, breaking the silence with a horrible distinctness. And like echoes, the thrilling war-cry of Apaches followed, until the desert seemed filled with demons thirsting for blood.

"Steady, lads—an' give 'em ge-lory!" yelled Mustang Sam, as he darted back to the corral. "Don't waste your lead—thar'll be chainco a-plenty fer each one, afore the night's out!"

Ye ling madly, the Apaches charged around the mesa upon either side, within a dozen spear-lengths before being visible. Then a line of fire ran along the barricade. At such close quarters, the result could not be otherwise than deadly, despite the gloom that rendered all attempt at aim futile. The shrieks and cries of the dying were added to the charging yell, the heavy thud and confused tramping of the half-tamed mustangs' hoofs, the spiteful cracking of rifles and the shrill twanging of bow-strings.

Still, though checked for a moment by the determined and deadly resistance, so much more determined than what they had anticipated, the Apaches were not repulsed. Uttering anew their yells, they urged their mustangs against the barricade, and then leaped bodily upon the wagon-tops, evidently resolved to end the matter by one desperate assault. But they had to encounter enemies well worthy their steel.

As the dusky fiends sought to scale the barricade of wagons, they were met with pistol-shots and clubbed rifles, and, when possible, with knife-rhusts.

The furious onslaught; the deadly repulse; the cracking of pistols and rifles, the louder detonation of carbines; the deadly whistling of bullets and hurtling of arrows; the clash of steel; the wild yells of one, the hoarse cheers of the other; the blood-curdling war-whcop; the stifled cry of imprecation as a foeman's weapon pierced the sensitive flesh, with now and then a dull thud that, once heard, can never be associated with anything else as some human form falls dead to its mother earth; the moans and groans of the mortally wounded, as they lie writhing upon the ground, beneath the recklessly-trampling feet of the combatants; the stentorian orders of the leaders; the yells of baffled hatred and tramp of the retiring one;

and then the glorious sound of the cheer of victory that welled up from the throats of those brave men as the last living savage disappeared! It was a wild, thrilling drama.

"Easy, lads—thar may be some skulkers about yit," cautioned Mustang Sam, as he drew his knife and leaped over the barricade.

But the repulse was complete and thorough. The Apaches had retreated in hot haste, carrying with them all of their number that had fallen without the corral.

The hearts of the emigrants sunk as they called the muster-roll. Seven of the number did not answer. They were already growing cold in death. Of the remainder, fully a dozen were more or less severely wounded, so desperate had been the assault.

Still, this was no time for idle repinings, and the survivors carefully reloaded their firearms, and lying in the blood of their slaughtered comrades awaited the expected assault.

CHAPTER III.

MUSTANG IN HIS ELEMENT.

BUT in this expectation they were most agreeably disappointed. The remainder of the night wore away, unbroken by the wild, charging cry of the Apaches, and when the light of day cast its first glimmerings over the desert and around the mesa, the emigrants felt a peculiar thrill of triumph, as they saw no sign of the enemy. The Apaches had measured metal with them, and more than satisfied, had sought more congenial quarters. This was the proud thought that thrilled the hearts of the majority, and in it the wounded forgot their hurts and exulted with the rest.

"Don't be sech fools, boys," at length said Mustang Sam, in a quiet tone. "You've did well and whipped the varmints right han'some-ly, I know; but you ain't out o' the woods yit. The varmints kin count nigh three heads to our one, an' kin easy bring more to the fore. Then is it likely they'd give all up fer one little hidin'? Not much! They'll try it on ag'in, be sure 'o that."

"But they're gone," muttered Sweatman.

"So's the night; but thar's another one comin'; an' jest so sure them Apaches 'll try it another whack. Don't misunderstand me. I don't say we won't whip 'em in the eend; ef you all fight like you did last night, we could flax the devil hisself with all his imps to back 'im. But come ag'in they will—or my name ain't Mustang Sam."

"You talk too slow. Heflin," impatiently interrupted Bland. "What we want, stranger, is for you to give us a description of the place where you saw our friends yesterday, so that there need be no time lost in hunting for their trail."

"I don't reckon thar's any need o' givin' you a map o' the trail, 's long's I go with ye, is thar?" quietly replied Mustang Sam.

"Will you go? Then there is some hope? for if man can do it, you will save them!" joyously cried Heflin.

"I'll do what I kin. Now, boys, look here. You see what we want. I don't say thar's no danger, but when a woman wants help a man

don't hold back fer that. We three men are goin'—but we want help. We may hev some fightin' on the road, but we've flaxed the varmints once, an' we kin ag'in. Who'll go?"

The answer was unanimous. Not one of the entire company, wounded as well, but eagerly volunteered for duty. Mustang Sam laughed pleasantly, his eyes sparkling with pride.

"Not all—some must stay to look a'ter the wagons. When they see we've divided, the Apaches may take a notion to try thar hands ag'in. So you see these who stay behind 'll hev tha'r shar' o' fun, too."

Enough of the uninjured men were selected to make the sallying party an even score in number, and then they prepared for work, overhauling their weapons and horse equipage, packing water and rations for each man, securely attached to their saddles. Mustang Sam cautioned the men remaining to defend the corral, giving them hints as to the various stratagems the Apaches might attempt, and their best methods of defense.

Then the party rode forth from the corral, and Mustang Sam bestrode the black stallion, now fully recovered from the killing race of the preceding day, and full of fire; yet the lesson received was not forgotten. It was as though he had been raised a pet from colthood. The slightest word or motion of its master was instantly obeyed, and the stallion seemed proud of its newly-found master.

In sheer exuberance of spirits the well-matched couple circled around in the little cavalcade, now half a mile in advance, now far in the rear, darting swiftly to one side or the other. It was like a boy fresh loosed from school. And while they wondered at the exquisite horsemanship thus displayed, the emigrants caught some of the hunter's enthusiasm, and at that moment would unhesitatingly have followed his lead even though he had charged into the midst of the entire Apache tribe.

For an hour or more they progressed thus, yet nothing had been seen of the Apaches. It seemed as though they had fled far from the spot of their discomfiture. But Mustang Sam believed different. That was not Apache nature. Though possibly they might not venture another attack for days, even weeks, they would hover around the train, watching for a favorable opportunity to pounce, vulture-like, upon their prey.

"It seems to me, stranger, that you are not acting very wisely," at length observed Bland. "The time may come when you will need all that waste wind and speed."

"Thar's a-plenty more whar that come from, fri'nd. Bless ye, man, a month o' sich play wouldn't faze this critter. He's the animile what was chased by a norther clear from the Yallerstone falls to the Big Red, an' it couldn't catch a hair o' hes tail. He was got by chain-lightning out of a harrycane, an' his name's Tornado. Houp-la!"

Uttering his wild slogan, the Mad Rider again circled round the cavalcade, the beau ideal of a dashing, reckless plainsman. Though but little above the medium hight, he was a model of masculine symmetry. At first glance he seemed slightly built, but in prairie parlance, "he was all thar." The long, round limbs were all bone

and tempered muscle; the round, compact chest and body, with their flanks; the well-shaped head and neck would have been admired by a sculptor, and his garb was one well fitted to display his form, the color bright, even gorgeous.

A blue broadcloth jacket, ornamented with numerous silver buttons and golden toys; a velvet vest of similar splendor, over a shirt-bosom of crimson silk, beautifully embroidered, no doubt a *gage d'amour*; trousers of the same material as the jacket, slashed from the knees downward, laced with a golden cord, and thickly studded with silver buttons and Spanish coins; gayly-beaded moccasins covered his small, well-shaped feet, armed at the heel with a huge pair of Mexican spurs. Around his head was bound the same silken sash that had been donned while watching the *mustenos*. From beneath this fell in wild profusion long curling locks of black hair, reaching half-way to his waist. A long, silken mustache, arched eyebrows, and keen, fiery eyes, all of the same jetty hue, lent firmness to the otherwise almost effeminately beautiful face; for the mouth was small, the red lips slightly pouting, the teeth even and white as pearls, and a spot of crimson burned upon either cheek. His age could not have greatly exceeded twenty-five years.

In one of his mad circuits, Mustang Sam abruptly checked Tornado, and leaping erect upon his back, gazed steadily toward a long, low sand-ridge, several miles to their left, and rear. The others followed his eyes, but could see nothing.

"What is it, stranger?" asked Bland, his heart throbbing fast.

"Apaches, I reckon. Yes—they're out from the bank now. A right smart chance of 'em, too. They're ridin' hot foot to cut us off from the train," was the prompt reply.

"Can't we reach the hills before them?"

"I reckon we could, ef we tried hard, but your critter wouldn't be worth much when we got thar. Sech big, heavy-footed critters ain't fit fer this deep sand business. A mustang can discount 'em in a long race. I reckon we'd better take it cool, an' keep our animals ready for work."

"But they'll run us down—a charge would swallow us up—they're so many," doubtfully added Bland.

"We could keep the flies off o' them, anyhow, while they was doin' that. But thar—we're both talkin' nonsense, old man. Them Injuns ain't a-goin' to run thar heads ag'in us, that way. They know we've got rifles an' revolvers, an' that we know how to use 'em, too. Long's twenty men keep in a bunch with eyes open, nothin' short of a thousand 'Patchies is goin' to charge 'em in good airnest. They'll try to skeer us an' make us scatter like a brood o' young quail—then they'd snipe us in."

While speaking, Mustang Sam was looking to his weapons, and his coolness soon restored the equanimity of the party, more than one of whom was now upon his "first trail."

"They're comin' a'ter us, lickety-split!" said Sweatman.

"You ain't skeered, Beauty?" laughed Mustang Sam.

"Not very bad. I've see'd Apaches afore to-

day—yes, an' fit 'em, too, afore you saw daylight," was the grim reply.

"Good! give me fifty boys like you, an' I'll agree to drive out the hull Apache nation afore Christmas time."

"Ef you're al'ays like you was last night, I wouldn't ax no better leader," and Sweatman's surly voice softened.

"But—you're sech a all-fired grumbler!"

"I kin bite, as well as growl—but not a fri'nd."

From that hour on, Mustang Sam never had a more devoted friend than "Growling Dan."

The Apaches were now distinctly visible, rushing on like a wind-storm, their long lances brandished above their heads, their yells, even at that distance, reaching the whites. Mustang Sam smiled grimly.

"They'll soon change that when they see we don't skeer wu'th a cent. I don't think they'll charge 'ithin range, but ef they do, we'll soon send 'em to the right about. But thar mustn't be no foolish waste of powder. I'll take the fu'st shot, then you three fellers here. Ef that don't stop 'em, I'll call out the ones to fire in tha'r turn. Let 'em once git us with empty we'pons, an' they'd ride over us like nothin'. Mind now; keep cool an' 'we may be happy yit!'" and the party laughed loudly at the slang phrase that was then in every western man's mouth.

Riding at a slow trot the emigrants pursued their route, though naturally casting many glances over their shoulders. The Apaches were now within half a mile, still charging madly on, stretched out in an irregular line formed of little clumps, according to the speed of their animals.

"Cowed!" shouted Sweatman, loudly laughing, as the foremost Apaches slackened their speed.

"They don't know what to make of it," smiled Mustang.

It was evident that the savages were not a little puzzled by the actions of the emigrants, so different from what might have been expected.

But they were still sore from their defeat of the past night, and as the stragglers came up, the leading brave appeared to be addressing them with fiery eloquence, judging from his animated features. Then uttering the thrilling war-cry, the entire party charged forward, brandishing their lances, or bows and arrows, with a few guns; for at that time the Apaches were but poorly supplied with firearms.

"Steady, lads—wheel about, an' remember what I said to you about holdin' your fire," coolly ordered Mustang Sam.

Motionless as statues the emigrants faced the yelling horde, their weapons in readiness for use in case their young leader should be wrong in his reasoning.

Though so vigorously begun, the charge of the Apaches weakened toward the end, and when within two hundred yards of the little band, the black mass divided and swept around the emigrants until they stood in the center of a double circle revolving in different directions.

"Steady, thar!" cried Mustang Sam, as the emigrants showed confusion. "Turn your horses' tails together, but wait ontel you hear

from me. The varmints is only tryin' to skeer us."

The men obeyed promptly, and quickly a hollow circle was formed, the face of each rider toward the rapidly galloping savages. Yelling and screeching more like fiends incarnate than humans, the Apaches were gradually narrowing their cordon. But Mustang Sam had witnessed such tactics before, and he resolved to checkmate the move.

"Hold fast, boys. I'm goin' out to drop a varmint. Ef they make a break 'ithin range, splatter away at 'em, as I told ye afore. Don't fire all to onc't."

With the last words Mustang touched Tornado with the spur, and the stallion bounded like a deer over the dry sand, carrying its master within range of the savages before they divined his purpose. Then at a twitch of the bow-stall, he stood motionless as a rock, while the borderer's rifle leaped to his shoulder.

The Apaches in front tried to evade the shot by flinging themselves behind their horses' bodies, but the Apache aimed at was too slow. With the spiteful crack of the ranger's rifle, the Indian was hurled far from his horse, shot through the body, the terrific fall finishing what the bullet began. He lay as he fell, a quivering mass of lifeless humanity.

A taunting yell broke from Mustang's lips as he noted the effect of his flying shot. The Apaches appeared fairly beside themselves with rage at this bold defiance, and screeching like demons they charged, with bows bent and fire-arms extended.

Fully a dozen of the nearest braves made a dart at Mustang Sam, whose rifle they knew to be empty, and they hoped to avenge the death of their comrade by a volley of arrows before the pale-face could retreat to his men. But Mustang did not mean to retreat just then. The fighting devil was roused in his breast, and he was like a starving panther at the first taste of blood.

A glance showed him that the emigrants stood firm, and were not shaken by the prospect of a collision, then he dropped his rifle across his thigh, drawing a revolver in either hand. His eye glared like living coals; his face was stern-set and white almost as a statue of marble. A wonderful change was wrought in the prairie dandy.

With a single yell he urged Tornado forward, guiding him alone by his knees and the swaying of his lithe body. Almost before the Apaches could realize his movement, he was upon them. Snorting angrily, with gleaming teeth and burning eyeballs, Tornado hurled himself upon the nearest mustang, bearing both horse and rider to the ground in a confused heap.

Taken by surprise, the Apaches scattered upon either side, and their arrows, discharged almost without an attempt at aim, hurtled wide of the mark. In rapid succession the borderer's revolver spoke, until a roll of smoke seemed to surround him. Here, there, forward, backward, to the right or left, Tornado plunged, guided by his master's body, and the pistols claimed a victim, now a horse, now a rider. The Apaches yelled in tones of wonder and half dismay. Probably not a dozen braves in the Apache nation

had heard of the deadly revolver; little wonder then that they were awed by this brave who could fire all day without once stopping to reload his weapons.

Tornado plunged heavily against a mustang, striking it to the ground with his hoofs. And then, for the moment free of immediate antagonists, Mustang Sam cast a glance toward his comrades.

The Apaches had charged in good earnest. Though knowing that some of their number must fall, they believed they could ride down the pale-faces with one rush by mere force of numbers. But Mustang Sam's influence still remained with the emigrants. Swiftly succeeding each other, the three marksmen he had selected, picked their man and fired as soon as they came within range. So coolly and deliberately had they fired, that two braves fell dead and the third was crushed beneath the body of his mustang, whose tossed head had received the bullet intended for its master's heart. Then the voice of Edward Bland rapidly called aloud the names of his comrades in succession, not a man touching trigger until called upon, and in full half the cases dropping his game.

"Hold your places! Out your revolvers and show them your metal, lads!" shouted Bland, setting the good example.

It was at this moment that Mustang Sam took in the scene, and a glow of pride crimsoned his cheek as he noted the cool bravery of his little band.

Fully a dozen savages were between him and the party of emigrants, half of them seeing naught but him. Bending forward, Mustang shouted to his charger, and dashed upon the enemy. They sprung aside, plying their bows. But a flying target is difficult to hit, especially when it holds a brace of revolvers. A moment later the Mad Rider reached his comrades, and loudly cheered them on with their deadly work.

The savage never wore paint that could long withstand such a withering fusillade, while so inefficiently armed himself. For a moment they wavered, then turned and abruptly retreated, though not so hastily, but that they carried off their dead and disabled warriors. But if repulsed, they were not defeated. A sullen yell answered the triumphant cheers of the pale-faces. It said that the end was not yet.

A hasty examination showed the following: two men were dead, transfixed with feathered shafts; several others were wounded, but none seriously. Mustang Sam himself carried one arrow in his shoulder, and another in his left thigh; fortunately neither were more than slight flesh wounds. Of the horses, one was killed, with a number of scratches among the others.

"We got off lucky that time, all things considered. But these poor fellows—" and Bland's voice faltered.

"They died like men, an' they shall have a decent burial, ef I die for't! Tie 'em on the extra hoss, an' ef the Apaches gits thur skulps, they must raise mine fu'st," said Mustang.

"What shall we do now?" asked Heflin.

"We sot out to go to the hills, so I reckon we'll keep on."

"They are between us—"

"Let 'em stay thar. They've had one taste of what we're made of, an' ef they hanker a'ter it, I reckon we kin spare 'em another. But you'll see 'em scatter. They may keep around us, but as long's we keep in a bunch, it'll be beyond range, *you bet!*"

Bearing in their midst the horse upon whose back the two dead emigrants were bound, the party advanced. As Mustang Sam had predicted, the Apaches gave way before them, keeping beyond rifle-shot, though still surrounding the cavalcade.

For fully an hour the emigrants marched on thus. Then Mustang uttered a low cry, and shading his eyes with one hand, peered eagerly before him. An Apache, bestriding a noble chestnut is there, galloping swiftly back and forth. There could be no mistake.

"It's Comanche, by the 'Tarnal!" gritted Mustang, his eyes flashing, his chest heaving. "Boys, that hoss is mine, an' I'll have him back or bu'st somethin' in the tryin'!"

"It would be madness to risk a race now!"

"But I'll do it, ef I can't manidge any other way. No red nigger ain't agoin' to ride Comanche while I live," quietly replied Mustang, placing his thumb and forefinger to his mouth.

At the shrill whistle, the noble chestnut abruptly halted and flung up his head, neighing loudly. Again the well-known signal sounded, and then the animal recognized its master.

With a shrill shriek of joy, the animal stretched out in full speed toward the emigrants, its rider desperately tugging at the reins. The Apaches uttered yells of surprise and warning, doubtless thinkin' their comrade mad.

Straight as an arrow Comanche made for his master, and Mustang laughed loudly as he noted the ludicrous terror imprinted upon the Indian's face. Half-frantic with fear, the Apache dropped the reins and leaped to the ground, rolling over and over in the mud. Before he could make an attempt to rise, Mustang Sam's rifle spoke, and a bullet crashed its way through the red-skin's brain.

"Look out! they're charging!" cried Edward Bland.

"Let 'em come! Good boy, Comanche! Ain't he a jewel, boys?" cried Mustang, as the chestnut halted beside him, whickering with delight, reaching up his velvet muzzle for a caress from his loved master. "But I'm goin' to lift that varmint's hair—so look out. *Houp-la!*" added Sam, as he leaped into Comanche's saddle and darted ahead.

The black stallion snorted angrily, and then ranged alongside the chestnut. But for a sharp word from Mustang there would have been a battle royal between the equine rivals, there and then.

The Apaches evidently divined the Mad Rider's object, and with angry yells they flocked forward. But, laughing loudly, Mustang reached the corpse first, and sweeping around it, without slackening his speed in the least, he stooped low and clutched the head of the dead brave, with a strength wonderful in one of such build, lifting it up and flinging the body across the saddle. Then the knife flashed forth, and a rapid circling motion removed the trophy. Swinging it above his head, Mustang uttered a

taunting yell, as he wheeled once more into position at the head of his men.

The deed fairly maddened the Apaches, and brought on another conflict. With ravening yells, they dashed upon the compact band. And once more the rifles spoke rapidly, but the savages dash on.

CHAPTER IV.

STRIKING TRAIL.

THE maddened Apaches charged with a fury that seemed irresistible. The little, lean, wiry horses were going at full speed, apparently with momentum, audacity and dash enough to break a square of infantry, or carry a battery of artillery. For a moment the little band of emigrants seemed doomed. It did not seem possible that they could escape being massacred to a man.

But then the rifles of the pale-faces spoke in regular rotation, and being held by men who were cool as though at play, the leaden missiles told severely upon the charging red-skins. Yet the Apaches dashed on with unabated vigor, lowering the steel points of their lances, as though meaning to charge bodily over the enemy.

"Give 'em your pistols, but keep your places, an' we'll whip 'em yit!" yelled Mustang Sam.

For a second time that day, the revolvers of the emigrants sounded the death-roll. Each man fired as rapidly as he could cock his weapon, and the reports were blended together in one long, rattling roll, answered by twanging bow-strings and clattering lances.

Yet, despite their loss, despite the fact that one or more of their number dropped to the blood-stained sand with every leap of their mustangs, the Apaches charged on. The insult flung in their teeth by Mustang Sam seemed to have completely maddened them, and rendered them insensible to fear or prudence.

The foremost braves dashed with leveled lances at the Mad Rider, determined to have revenge. Mustang Sam laughed recklessly as he prepared for them.

At a touch of his knees, Comanche bounded forward, and swaying his body to one side, Mustang caught the long, scalp-bedecked shaft beneath his arm, with one quick motion snapping it in twain. At the same moment his revolver spoke, and a second Apache reeled back, the blood gushing fitfully from his broad chest.

"Look out thar, Mustang!" came Sweatman's warning voice.

The Mad Rider turned his head and realized his danger. The Apache he had disarmed of his lance had drawn a knife and was even then bending forward to make a finishing thrust.

Swaying lightly to one side, Mustang swept around his heavy revolver, the barrel striking the red-skin's wrist. A howl of angry pain broke from his lips as the member fell, the bones cracking like dried reeds. Bending low along his animal's back, he turned and fled from the spot of death. His example seemed contagious. Stunned and confused by the rapidly-detonating revolvers, that seemed never to require reloading, the Apaches retreated in sad disorder.

Scarcely one minute had elapsed since the charge began before the Apaches were once more beyond rifle-range.

The emigrants had not escaped unscathed. Three of their number were dead; others were wounded. The survivors looked grave and stern. One-fourth of their number had wasted away since leaving the wagon corral, and yet they were not half-way to the point of rocks. The prospect began to look gloomy. If the Apaches should continue their furious charges, they must prove victorious in the end. Yet the men silently obeyed when Mustang bade them bind their fallen comrades upon the backs of the extra horses. No one protested against the journey being continued, though more than one thought of the little stream of water that flowed from the *mesa* spring, out into the desert sands, gradually growing less and less, until the greedy, insatiable desert gulped down the last drop; and a similar fate seemed to be in store for them. They were the stream, the Apaches were the desert sands.

With Mustang Sam leading the way, the little cavalcade rode steadily onward, bearing their dead in their midst. They rode in silence now. The mocking laughter, the jests and repartees were no longer heard.

The Apaches were still within sight, though more to the rear of the pale-faces, drawn together, evidently earnestly consulting. It seemed as though they had given up all hopes of conquering that brave handful; but Mustang and Sweatman did not reason in that way. They read the Apache nature too thoroughly to fall into such an error.

"Don't you b'lieve it, fellers," Sam said; "we hain't see'd the last o' them yit. I don't say they'll charge us ag'in, like the last time, fer I think we giv' 'em a good dose then, but they'll hang around an' watch their chainces to git in a underhand lick. But ef we keep our eyes open, I reckon we'll fool 'em yit."

Riding steadily on, the emigrants soon lost sight of the Apaches entirely. Some believed the enemy had gone back to the corral, thinking to secure an easy victory there, but, knowing how strong the position was, little fear was felt as to the result.

All at once Mustang Sam reined in Comanche and motioned to his followers to halt, bending his head forward in eager listening. A rapid glance ran round the party. The same thought struck each and every one of the living riders.

"Our fri'nds is in trouble yender 'mong the hills," said Mustang, his eyes glowing. "It was a white man's rifle that I heard. Mebbe we'll be in time yit if we hurry," and he urged Comanche onward.

At breakneck speed the party dashed on. In front rode Mustang Sam, still bestriding the proud Comanche, while Tornado kept close alongside, jealously eying his rival.

The point of rocks loomed up more and more distinctly, and it was now plain that the alarming sounds proceeded from the other side of the spur. It was plain that a stout defense was being made. The quick, sharp reports of revolvers were heard, mingling with wild yells, and an occasional shriek of some human being in mortal agony.

It was no time to consult caution or prudence. Even the loss of a moment might be fatal. Mustang Sam turned his head and waved a re-

volver toward his followers, then dashed swiftly around the point of rocks. Unhesitatingly the emigrants followed.

A thrilling sight burst upon the vision as Mustang Sam dashed around the rocky point. A ledge of rocks, some forty feet above the level of the desert, was thickly veiled with smoke from the revolver-muzzles that still vomited forth death. At the foot of this ledge, yelling wildly, trying to scale the rocks, was a horde of dusky figures—the hornets of the prairie. Not all were standing erect. The ground was strewn with motionless bodies, their unnatural position plainly telling that death had claimed its prey.

This much the one glance showed Mustang Sam, but he did not stop to count the odds. A revolver in either hand, he uttered his wild war-cry, and urged Comanche forward at full speed. Startled and amazed, the Apaches turned their gaze, just as the rescuing party dashed around the point.

Yells of alarm and dismay broke from their lips, as they, with one accord, sprung toward their ponies. But death was even faster. The revolvers of Mustang Sam sent a leaden hail through the flying mass, and then the Mad Rider was upon them. Side by side did Comanche and Tornado force their way through the terror-stricken wretches, crushing and mangling limbs and bodies beneath their sharp hoofs, while the deftly-handled revolvers dealt death upon either side.

"*Houp-la!* make your mark, boys. Imps like these killed your comrades—wipe 'em off the face o' the airth!" yelled the Mad Rider, wheeling his horse for a return charge.

"Hooray for Mustang Sam!" shouted a stentorian voice, as a dark figure recklessly bounded down the rocks, and plunged into the *melee* with flashing knife.

In sheer surprise Mustang reined in Comanche. The voice was that of Tom McKoun, and Ralph Weston was even then clambering down from the rock-ledge, moving with difficulty, for one arrow quivered in his shoulder, another deep in his thigh.

A bitter groan burst from Edward Bland's ashy lips, as he saw that the ledge was now empty. Heartsick and faint, he bowed in his saddle, his face resting upon his horse's mane. Heflin rushed up to Weston, crying in hoarse, unnatural tones:

"Ella—my child—where is she? Tell me—quick!"

"Your child? I know nothing of her," replied the astonished young man. "I don't understand you."

"Wasn't she here—haven't you been fighting for her?"

"I've been fighting for my life—I and my mate yonder—against those accursed Apaches—nothing more. But here—if you don't mean to use that horse, let me have it before the red devils are all killed!" and almost tearing Heflin from the saddle, Weston mounted, despite the arrows that still rankled in his wounds, and with a wild yell, dashed away to join in the fight—or rather massacre.

And massacre it might well be called, for the Apaches did not show fight, being bewildered

and completely cowed by the surprise. They had made a dash for their ponies at Mustang Sam's first shot, but Comanche overtook them, and the half-wild mustangs, frightened by the uproar and confusion, tossed their heels aloft and then fled madly over the desert, leaving their masters in the lurch.

The Apaches are essentially horse Indians. Afoot they are slow, clumsy and awkward, like a professional jockey. A man of ordinary speed can easily distance them. Thus the mounted emigrants rode them down, slaying them mercilessly, urged on in their work of blood by the sight of their dead comrades as the death-bearing horses wheeled to and fro, snorting wildly, intensely excited. With those figures in view, it was not likely that the whites would think of mercy.

Occasionally an Apache, rendered desperate, would turn and discharge an arrow or two, but seldom did these reach their mark.

It was a thrilling yet sickening scene, though it lasted only a few minutes. Thus it ended, for want of further victims. Of the entire band of Apaches but two or three escaped, these scrambling up the rocks, unobserved during the confusion.

Then, while the party were looking to their hurts, Mustang Sam questioned his mates. Substantially, their story was as follows:

With considerable difficulty they had mastered the steel-gray mustang roped by Weston, who had then applied saddle and bow-stall, and mounted to break the horse. In the wild gallop that followed, he observed a large and fresh trail, evidently made by Indians. As soon as possible he returned to where McKoun was. Fearing lest Mustang Sam should get into trouble, they took his trail. Nearing the point of rocks, they heard the sound of fire-arms, and believing their fears confirmed, dashed on, resolved to save their mate or share his fate. Scarcely had they gained the point of rocks, than a strong body of Apaches dashed around it. As their only chance, the hunters dismounted and took to the rocks, trusting in their revolvers to keep the enemy at bay. Twice they repulsed them; once in the evening, the other late in the night. The third and last one bade fair to be successful, for they were both wounded, and their ammunition was growing low, when the opportune arrival of Mustang Sam and his party saved them from the threatened fate.

"It was on this ridge that I see'd them folks that I telled ye of, Bland. Whar'bouts did the sound of firin' seem to come from, Tom?"

"From t'other side the hill, a good bit over that way," pointing to the high, open ground from which the spur jutted. "It didn't last long though. There hain't been any fun over thar sence yest'day, as I could hear."

"Then it is as I feared—those devils have butchered my child!" groaned Bland, an unutterable depth of despair written upon his blanched countenance.

"Don't be a fool, man," sharply but with kind intention spoke Mustang. "When thar's two trails, al'ays take the best. Try to bl'ieve that your fri'nds whipped out the red niggers jest as we've done so often, but are still hidin'

in the rocks, afraid to ventur' out while the ho'-nets are buzzin' round so thick. Try it—you'll git on a heap better for it."

"He says well, neighbor," said Heflin, bravely mastering his emotion. "We will hope for the best while we may, and then if it *should* prove what you fear—then we at least have vengeance left us."

"And we will have it too—will drink deep of it! She is the last one left me—the rest are all gone. If *she* is gone too, I am alone. I'll have only one thing then to live for—as you say, vengeance!" gritted Bland, a strange change coming over his face.

"An' we'll help you, too, old man," hastily added Mustang. "But this is losin' time. Let's be travelin'. Yender's whar I sighted the folks. As they was hossback, I reckon we kin go thar too."

The party trotted rapidly along the foot of the ridge. The rocks in most places rose precipitously for many feet, then broke into long narrow ledges, rising one above the other, stair-like. The designated point was reached, but the rocky wall still rose smooth and bare. It soon became evident that the party, wherever they were, must have gained the ledge from the high ground beyond.

Nothing was left for it but a gallop to that point, and the rapidly waning day warned the party to make all the speed possible in case they hoped to strike the trail before night descended and put a stop to their labors. Once there, finding a number of the ledges, Mustang Sam placed all the horses upon one, in charge of half the sound men, while the others were divided along the trail. By the aid of lassoes, it would be easy for those above to descend to the ledges upon which the animals were. And so they proceeded with the search.

For full an hour the search was without success, save that Mustang Sam found unmistakable signs of where horses had passed at no very distant date. But the nature of the sign was such that he could not tell, with certainty, in which direction the wanderers had been traveling.

Then a signal from the opposite side of the ridge reached their ears, telling of some important discovery. By tough scrambling the footman managed to cross the ridge, and gained the spot where stood Dan Sweatman.

He stood upon a ledge not quite six feet wide, where it made an abrupt curve; thus two persons could occupy the same level, within a dozen yards of each other, yet be hidden from view. At this point beyond a doubt had taken place the fight that had alarmed the two hunters, for the rocks around, as well as the ledge, were plentifully sprinkled and besmeared with blood.

"I found these here," muttered Sweatman, showing several metallic cartridge shells, still black with burnt powder.

"Captain Day used them," observed one of the emigrants.

"There's somethin' layin' down yonder in a hole," suddenly uttered one of the men. "I kin see a bit o' black hair."

Heflin sprang forward with a half-stifled cry. His Ella was a brunette. Only for the restrain-

ing hand of Mustang, he would have leaped from the ledge, at the risk of breaking his limbs.

"Wait—I'll go down and see what it is. Boys, a rope here."

Mustang Sam swung lightly down over the ledge by the lasso. The next moment he gave a glad cry, that thrilled the hearts of all.

"It's only a red-skin, boys—live at that! You pull him up an' mebbe we kin squeeze somethin' out o' him."

The savage—seemingly dead—was soon hauled up to the ledge, followed by Mustang Sam. A ghastly hole could be seen upon his breast, though nearly closed by congealed blood.

Mustang Sam questioned him in Spanish, but the savage made no reply. A flask of whisky was placed to his lips, and after a brief hesitation, he drank eagerly. Then Mustang repeated his questions, who were the parties engaged in the fight; how it ended; why he was left behind, alone.

"If you tell us this, you shall have more fire-water, and shall sing your death-song in peace. If you refuse, I will shave off your scalp-lock and paint your cheeks black, that the Great Spirit may know another squaw has come to labor for the true braves. I will do this, for I am a man, and do not speak lies."

"Give me some more fire-water now, to make me stronger, and I will tell you all I know," replied the Apache, after a pause.

"It's a shame to waste sech good lickar on a red nigger; but ef you say so, here's some," muttered McKoun, disgustedly. "He'll only stuff you with a lot o' durned lies to pay for 't."

"He may, but we won't be no worse off then than we are now."

The Apache seemed greatly revived by the strong liquor, though it was evident to all that his race was well-nigh run. He spoke slowly as though in pain, keeping his eyes riveted upon Mustang Sam's countenance.

He said that he was one of the party that first encountered Mustang Sam, riding Tornado. They discovered the trail of the wagon-train, and shortly after, a small trail, made by four horses. A dozen warriors followed this. It led them to the high and broken ground. They caught sight of the object of their search, trying to regain the level. A chase ensued, and the whites were cut off from the hills beyond, and forced back along the spur, it being impossible for them to descend the series of gigantic steps. They made a stand, and fought bravely—the two men did, for the others were women. They killed three or four braves, but the two pale-faced warriors were killed. Just as they fell, he—the Apache—fell from loss of blood, rolling over the ledge, unobserved by his comrades. That was all he could tell. For the most part since, he had been insensible.

"If the white braves were killed, where are their bodies?" asked Mustang, keenly eying the gasping savage.

"They were brave men, and fought like Apaches. My brothers will take them home and burn them at the stake, that the boy braves may learn how to die."

"And the women—what will become of them? Burn, too?"

"No; the chief will see them, and take them

into his lodge, that they may keep his fire bright, and be the mothers of chiefs."

"Who is your chief?" hastily asked Mustang, fearful lest either of the bereaved parents should understand this speech.

"He is Blanco," and the savage spoke in a tone of deep reverence; then as if fainting, he added—"more fire-water!"

Mustang Sam bent over him and raised the flask to his lips, but the next moment leaped back with a little cry. He had felt the hand of the Apache touch his side.

A faint yell broke the air. It was the war-cry of the Apache. A bright blade flashed in the rays of the setting sun. It sunk to the very hilt in the Indian's heart, driven by his own hand. And with a look of triumph upon his grim features, he fell back, dead.

According to his belief he had insured his own entrance into the spirit-land as a brave; he had died with his scalp undefiled.

"All that whisky gone for nothin'!" growled Sweetman.

"I don't think so," quietly responded Mustang. "I believe our fri'nds whipped the Apaches an' tuck to the hills to hide ontel it was safe to ventur' out. I'll tell ye why. You all see that that imp hated us like p'ison, true to his color. Then would he 'a' put us on the right trail, givin' us a chance to git back the wimmin? Not much! Ef they had bin tuck, he'd 'a' swore they got cl'ar away among the hills, an' so sent us on a wild-goose chase. Then them ca'tridge shells. D' you s'pose the Injuns knowed enough to unload such a shooter? It *was* unloaded, as you see. I b'lieve this soldier feller did it himself, a'ter whippin' the Apaches. Then they rid on an' tuck to the hills yender. An' thar's whar we've got to look for 'em."

"Then you think there is still hope?" faltered Edward Bland.

"I do—an' shall think so ontel I see tha'r dead karkidges."

Thus cheering the hearts of the fathers, Mustang led the way back along the ledge, until they could be joined by the animals. But by that time, the sun had disappeared and darkness was upon them. Sick at heart, Bland and Heflin were forced to admit the folly of attempting any further search that night, and descending the rocks, the party sought a place of rest for the time being.

CHAPTER V.

CURIOSITY-SEEKERS IN TROUBLE.

A JOYOUS party was the quartette as they rode away from the wagon-train in the early dawn, laughing, chatting, speculating upon the marvels that awaited their research amidst vonder wild, picturesque hills and canyons. Even the dignified officer thawed out and joined in the playful badinage, his large black mustache bristling with fun, his black eyes twinkling merrily whenever they were not talking love's silent language unto the fair Edith.

Fair, Edith Bland assuredly was; more, she was a beautiful woman. A little above the medium hight of women, she was slender and lithe, with a peculiar willowy grace in every movement, the perfection of delicate symmetry. Her hair, luxuriant and waving, was a

rich golden brown. Her complexion was one of dazzling clearness and purity, upon which the desert winds and heat made no impression; a pure, healthy pink and white. Large lustrous eyes, softly shining, of a deep, melting blue. A purely oval face, with features of classic regularity. But there was none of the cold hauteur that is its usual concomitant. Hers was a nature formed to love and to be loved in return. And nature had taken its course here. The gallant soldier had wooed and won her heart of hearts.

Ella Heflin was a brunette; a saucy, independent, fun-loving little witch, charming and erratic as a humming-bird, an arrant coquette, who kept, among others, Arthur Hamilton upon the sharp thorns of suspense, one moment in a heaven of delight, the next plunged into the opposite extreme. And so it was during this ride to the hills.

As they neared the high and broken ground, the attention of all was turned toward the wild and impressive scenery. Before them loomed the walls of one of those remarkable monuments of bygone ages, a temple of the sun, a palace of Montezuma; at least so they believed.

A wall, fifty feet in height, by nearly thrice that in length, crowned the summit of a high ridge. Irregular openings showed along the line, like broken windows and shattered portals. As far as the eye could reach, until hidden behind a jutting scrag, a regular low wall stretched, like a rampart, its top ragged and uneven, as though some of the rocks of which it had been formed had been thrown down by a conquering enemy, or the wasting hand of time. This, taken in conjunction with the grand and weird scenery around, was enough to interest even the lovers, and to divide their attentions.

It was not until they had entered the tract of rock-land, that the deception was discovered, and the *casa grande* of the Montezumas found to be only the work of fantastic nature, instead of human art. Sandstone and marl, trap and lignite predominated. The softer material had gradually worn away, leaving the harder portion in bold relief, forming fantastic burlesques upon many a familiar object. The slopes were dotted with *buttes* or *mesas* of mingled sandstones and slate wrought into whimsical shapes. Thus, though greatly disappointed in finding this ruined palace of the Sun-worshippers nothing more than a natural mass of rock, the little party found no little delight and pleasure in wandering among these freaks of nature.

"Look yonder—there's a gigantic church-bell!" cried Edith.

"Yes, and there's a bottle of Holland gin," added matter-of-fact Arthur Hamilton.

"You ought to be obliged to drink it, for such a vulgar ideal!" retorted Ella. "Couldn't you have called it a bottle of sherry, with the head snapped off?"

"Then how do you like Lot's wife, over yonder?"

"They didn't wear crinolines, in those days, stupid!"

And thus the little party of curiosity-seekers advanced further into the wild region, led on

by still other and different objects of nature's handiwork, unheeding the lapse of time or paying much attention to their course.

At length, reluctantly they turned to retrace their steps. For in the distance shone the battered and broken walls and ramparts of Nature's *Casas Grandes*. It seemed the same one they had sighted from the desert, and toward it the party advanced. But the way grew more and more rugged. At times they were forced to make wide *detours*, to avoid some precipitous descent or rise, or to go around some deep yawning abyss. It was strange that there had not been noticed as they came along. Yet none of the party suspected the truth—that they were straying far from the right course. Guided by the sun, they thought there could be no mistake, but more time had been spent in the exploration than they dreamed of, and thus their calculations erred.

Suddenly they came upon the edge of a canyon by far deeper and wider than any they had heretofore seen. Crossing at this point was impossible, and yet, as far as the eye could reach in either direction, the chasm extended; that is until hidden from view by an uprising monstrosity of nature's handiwork.

For fully an hour they rode along the edge of the canyon, never losing sight of it for more than a few moments at a time, as it became necessary to avoid unsurmountable obstacles. For a short distance it ran straight and true as the flight of an arrow, but then it began to turn and twist in a zigzag and tortuous manner. Then, though taking a great many steps, the quartette made but little actual progress.

Day was growing more and more uneasy, at the swift lapse of time, though he sought to conceal this feeling as much as possible. The canyon grew deeper and deeper, though less wide, until at one point, it was scarcely twelve feet across at the top, though wider beneath where the long-vanished water had eaten away the softer sandstone. This narrow place, however, did not last beyond a few hundred yards. Then as the canyon made an abrupt curve, it widened again. The quartette were now in the toe of a gigantic horse-shoe, and as he realized this, Tom Day abruptly reined in his horse.

"We must manage to cross it somehow. We might wander on for hours without finding our way out of this labyrinth."

"I don't see how we can," replied Ella, a little nervously.

"If you ladies would trust me—" hesitated Day.

"We will. Tell us what to do, and if possible we will obey," quietly replied Edith, with implicit confidence in her lover.

"Back to that narrow place then," cried the officer.

When there, he touched his horse with the spur, and headed him at the crevice. Rising into the air, the animal crossed it like a bird, alighting safely upon the other side. Turning, Day leaped back again.

"There—you see there is no danger. A child could leap it without any trouble. It only requires a little faith and confidence. Edith, dare you try it?"

"You go first, and I will follow," was the

low, quick reply, though her cheeks were snowy white, as her gaze instinctively wandered down the dizzy depth, when a step or a mistake might plunge her—to instant death.

"There—you see—"

Leaping the chasm, Tom turned his head to cheer Edith when he saw her alight safely behind him. She had taken the leap at almost the same moment.

"I can't do it—I should faint and tumble down that ugly black hole," whimpered Ella, entirely subdued.

"Then I'll have to take you over—clear the way, there!"

In an emergency Hamilton could act as prompt and decisive as any one. Deftly, yet tenderly, he grasped Ella round the waist and lifted her from the saddle, holding her tight to his breast. Then, before she comprehended his purpose, he spurred his animal on to the leap. Though doubly burdened, the noble creature did not belie its master's confidence, and accomplished the feat in safety.

"There—if I have offended you, forgive me. I could see no other way," muttered Arthur, as they turned to call the other horse.

Ella quickly turned her head, and as Arthur bent his at the same moment, it chanced that their lips came in contact. Bashful though he was, Arthur did just what any other man would. As they felt the contact, his lips clung there for a moment; and in that moment, that indefinable, delicious nothing, a kiss, was born.

Probably Ella was too badly frightened to notice this, for she said nothing. Certainly Arthur was too badly frightened by his own temerity to say aught. Day was busy coaxing the horse to follow its companion, and if Edith noticed the catastrophe, she was considerate enough to look unconscious, and turn aside her head.

The horse crossed, and Ella regained her own saddle; then the party proceeded in higher spirits, thinking that the worst of the journey was over. Little did they dream of what the future had in store for them!

A few moments later, from the top of the high ridge, they caught sight of the open ground before them, and far away in the distance, so as to be barely visible, in fact, were the white tilted wagons.

"Thank God for that! I began to fear we were lost in this dismal place," fervently uttered Edith.

The edge of the rock-tract was neared. A long spur or ridge shot out into the desert. Toward the base of this they rode, as the route seemed easiest. Suddenly Tom Day reined in and turned his head with a cry of alarm.

"Indians!"

Upon the desert below them, slowly advancing toward the spur, was a large body of horsemen. The long lances, the uniform dusky color, could not be mistaken. They were Indians.

"Stoop low—they have not seen us yet," the soldier hurriedly muttered. "In a moment they will be hidden behind the ridge. Now—follow me. We must reach some spot where we can hide, or as they pass by the point they will discover us."

"There come some more from the other direction," quietly added Hamilton, pointing back to a cloud of dust.

"It's our only chance—hasten!" reiterated Day, leading on.

"No—it's a white man—I saw the sun shining on a black mustache!" cried keen-eyed Ella, after a few moments.

"God help him, then! He is rushing headlong upon his death!"

"Can't we warn him?" asked Edith, her cheek blanching.

"Not without betraying our own presence to those fiends—and then we, too, would share that poor fellow's fate."

Edith tore the shawl from her shoulders and waved it rapidly. Seemingly the horseman did not notice it, for he did not stay his progress. As the reader knows, this Mad Rider was Mustang Sam, upon Tornado.

The quartette heard all that followed, though they could see nothing. The spur of rocks concealed the *melée* from their view. Still, they doubted not that the unfortunate horseman was slain.

To their surprise, the tumult, the thud of hoofs upon the sand, gradually died away, though the savages did not appear in sight round the spur. Tom Day clambered over the rocks to reconnoiter. To his surprise, he saw the Indians far away, in hot haste after the horseman.

Hastily returning to his companions, Day led them on, believing that his only chance consisted in reaching the level, and then, by skirting the rocks, reach the wagon-train by a detour wide enough to insure passing the Indians unseen, should they return to look after their fallen. And then the train must be warned, for they had believed the vicinity to be free of Indians.

But this programme was speedily frustrated. Scarcely had they crossed the ridge, when a wild yell of triumph broke upon their hearing, and a number of savages were seen bounding rapidly toward them. They came from the rock-hills, and were on foot. Still, long before the pale-faces could descend to the level, they would be upon them. And this Day readily realized.

"We'll have to fight them, Arthur," he said, sternly, looking to his carbine and pistols. "Follow me close, to yonder ledge. Once upon that, these devils can't touch the ladies only as they pass over our bodies. Courage, Edith—we can easily dispose of those yelping vagabonds."

"I can't see more than a dozen, and they have only bows and arrows. If it were only us two, I'd ask no better fun than to teach these dogs a lesson. But make haste—they're coming up fast."

Reaching the ledge, Day made Edith and Ella ride on in advance, while he and Arthur threatened the Apaches with their rifles. But it was plain that matters must soon come to a crisis. Confident in their superiority of numbers, the Apaches rushed boldly up, delivering their arrows as they came.

"The girls are safe 'round the bend now. S'pose we have the matter out here, where they can not get hurt?" said Tom. "They can only advance upon us by this one ledge. Once around that point, we can pick them off as fast as they can come up."

"Right—I forgot their cursed arrows," and Day winced involuntarily as a barbed shaft grazed his throat.

Dashing round the point, they quickly dismounted and raised their rifles. Their well-trained horses, both used to fire, stood firm.

As though expecting the pale-faces would continue their flight as long as the ledge extended, the Apaches came rushing on in a body. As they rounded the curve, two rifle-shots startled them. Discharged at scarce ten yards' distance, the result could not but be fatal. And then, steady as though target-firing, the two men emptied their weapons into the thick-crowded mass; Tom Day his repeating rifle, and Hamilton falling back upon his revolvers.

The skirmish was brief, ending almost as soon as begun. Taken by surprise, the Apaches did not know what to make of men who did not have to reload their weapons.

A dozen shots were fired in as many seconds. The ledge was blocked up with the dead and dying. With yells of dismay the three survivors turned and fled. One of them fell by Day's hand; the others soon reached the plain, running rapidly along the trail of the main party.

One of the fallen Apaches has given an account of the affair, but as Mustang Sam shrewdly suspected, it was garbled.

The attacking party did not belong to those who had attacked the train afterward. They had struck the trail as stated, had followed it up to the hills. There they lost it, and when drawn to the desert by the sound of firearms, for the first time set eyes upon their prey. But the attack had not succeeded; on the contrary, the whites proved the victors.

"No—we're all right," cried Day, as Edith and Ella rode up. "We didn't give 'em time to use their arrows. But come—Arthur, help me pitch this carrion over the ledge. There's no time to lose. Those rascals will soon have the whole troop upon our heels, if we burn daylight. But if we can gain the train first—which I think can be done by hard riding—we're all right."

The ledge cleared of the dead Apaches, the snorting animals were led past; then mounting, the party rode rapidly along the ledge, looking for a place by which they might descend to the plain below. But before this was found, Edith cried, in a tone of terror, pointing toward the desert:

"My God! Look yonder!"

CHAPTER VI. "TREED."

THE eyes of all followed the direction of her outstretched arm.

Far away, scarcely discernible, in fact, the white titted wagons remained stationary, as though awaiting their swift-approaching doom. Mustang Sam could no longer be distinguished, but the dust-cloud that enveloped the mass of Apaches in pursuit still hovered over the desert, plainly marking their position. Still nearer the hills was a second dust-cloud; and between this and the quartette were the two fleeing Apache braves.

It was the second dust-cloud that drew the exclamation of horror and despair from the

blanched lips of Edith Bland. As she gazed anxiously out upon the prairie, the thin veil lifted, and she could quite distinctly discern the form of both horses and riders. It took but a moment to read the truth: the savages were riding rapidly toward the hills.

"Curse the luck! the devils are coming back!" gritted Tom Day, his large black eyes glistening like live coals. "They must have the eyes of buzzards, to see us so far against these rocks."

"I don't believe they have seen us yet," said Arthur. "But they will soon know all about this little affair. See! those two varmints are returning direct to meet them. They will tell all, and then—well, you can guess the rest."

"Our horses are fast—can't we reach the level, and then run away from the Indians?" hesitated Edith.

"No. It would take us full fifteen minutes to get down these cursed rocks. Before that the savages will have met, and then they'd spread out and cut us off, and so force us to fight or take to the hills again. There is only one thing left us that I see," gloomily responded Day.

"And that is to die?" murmured Edith, leaning nearer her lover's strong form. "Though life has been very pleasant and sweet to me, promise me this, that you will not leave me, even in death—if the worst must come, that you will not die and leave me alive in the power of those fiends!" and the maiden shuddered convulsively.

"I will kill you with my own hand rather than that," he gloomily made answer. "Better death than the fate that would be yours in their power."

"I know—I have heard—and thank you for the promise; only tell me a moment before—that I may die with *your* face last in my eyes."

"All this is very pretty talk, of course, but my motto is sound sense before heroics. Are we to sit idly here until those gentlemen in red come up and relieve us of our suspense and scalps at the same time?" a little impatiently interrupted Hamilton.

"What can we do?—our retreat is cut off."

"In one direction—yes. But here are the hills behind us. There are thousands of hiding-places. Among them all, surely we can lie concealed until night, and then in the darkness, perhaps we can manage to give the heathen the slip, after all, and gain the desert. Once there, I think we can manage to rejoin our friends before daylight."

"You are right. I was a fool to give way so soon; but you know, *she* is in danger, and I—"

"I believe I can understand your feelings, Tom," softly whispered Austin, with a swift glance toward the now quite subdued Ella Heflin.

"A black ending to our pleasure-ride! But one thing—those devils shall not have much to boast of. If they push us too hard, there will be more than one Apache lodge-fire extinguished forever!"

During these hastily exchanged words, the two men were not idle. Every moment was of value now. Each buckle and strap of their horse equipage was completely looked to and tested. The failing of any one of these when the trial came might be death—or worse.

"Come!" cried Day, leaping into the saddle. "Now for the hills and rocks behind us!"

"Wouldn't it be better to keep on, right ahead? We will be close to the open then, and our friends are out there," suggested Hamilton.

"We don't know the ground in that direction. Over this way we do—at least partially. I believe by crossing the canyon again, we can throw those devils off the scent. Then, while they are making for us, we can pick our way to the level around the point of rocks, and then ride after our friends. Though a roundabout course, I believe that it is the safest one left us," argued Day, and Arthur was silent, if not convinced.

But, though so plain and simple in speech, this plan was found a difficult one to put into execution. The hard rocks had retained little or no trace of their passage a few hours before, and more than once Tom Day checked his horse, gazing around with a bewildered air. In their haste to reach the open ground once more, the curiosity-seekers had taken little or no notice of the winding trail. Here and there, upon every hand lay curious landmarks in the fantastic and grotesque mass of rocks, the same or strangely similar to those the curiosity-seekers had inspected, but time and again, as he hastened forward with a cry of joy, Day found out his mistake, as some yawning chasm or frowning wall shut off further progress, forcing them to retrace their steps to seek another passage.

"I believe this is the right trail at last—see! is not that where a hoof has slipped upon that soft rock? If we are deceived here, may God have mercy upon us all!"

With these words, Tom Day urged his animal on, and a few minutes more brought him upon the edge of the canyon, at the point where they had crossed it that day. Though without finding audible utterance, the hearts of each one of the little party breathed a prayer of thanksgiving for thus being guided aright.

As before, Tom Day led the way, and this time neither Edith nor Ella showed any timidity about following.

"Make haste—around this curve," earnestly said Day. "They may come up at any moment, and if they set eyes on us now, nothing remains but a stern fight till death. Once hidden, they may not find the crossing, and then we will be comparatively safe."

"We could make a good stand here," quietly said Hamilton. "From behind yonder pile of rocks, we could command the leap, and keep it clear of red-skins as long as our weapons hold out—until they were empty, I mean."

"But you will not—?"

"No, darling—not unless we are forced to it," soothingly replied Day. "For your sake we will be doubly cautious. Would to God that you were once more safe with the train."

"But it may be in danger, too. Think what a large force of those hostile Indians are now riding almost direct for the wagons. What if they should attack it, and—"

"Then—let us hope for the best, while we may. But look, Arthur! Isn't this the place we passed before—this valley? Surely yonder stands your bottle of gin?"

"It looks like the same—but I can't tell. I'm all mixed up."

For some minutes more they rode on, eagerly looking for some covert in which they might hope to lie concealed until the shades of night favored their escape. Then, with one accord the party halted, interchanging glances of wondering alarm.

The sharp report of fire-arms came to their ears, mingled with shrill yells, that could only proceed from savage throats. And these sounds came from directly in front, apparently at no great distance from the little party.

"The Indians have attacked somebody; but who?"

"A conundrum—I give it up," muttered Hamilton.

"Our friends—they have missed us, and have come to hunt us up!" eagerly exclaimed Edith.

"No—that can scarcely be. They would not desert the train, and a small force would have been picked up by those red-skins we saw chasing that single horseman."

"But if it should?" gasped Ella. "And we standing idle here, while they are being murdered!"

"I fear we will not be idle long, then!" and Day wrenched both his own and the horse ridden by Edith around. "To cover—quick! Those are Indians ahead of us in the valley! Quick—or we are lost!"

"Take it coolly, Day. The harm is already done. Hear them yelp! The devils have sighted us!"

Half a mile or more down the valley, several dark forms could be distinguished among the grayish rocks and fantastic figures, and now their yells came quite distinctly to the ears of the fugitives. The cries were long-drawn and peculiar. Day clinched his teeth and contracted his brows, as he divined the truth. They were signaling their more distant comrades, to tell them the game was afoot.

"If this is the valley we first entered, those rascals must be upon the same side of the canyon that we are. If so, we can cross over and hold them at bay there, until nightfall," suggested Hamilton.

"They are afoot—can't we run away from them? Our horses are not very tired," said Edith.

"Over these rocks a footman is fully if not more than equal to a horse. And yet we can't desert them, for once upon the level, beyond, by their aid alone could we ever regain the wagons. Come, then, we will go back. At least we will place the canyon between us and them; after that we can decide upon our future course."

"Not straight back—make a detour, and those imps may be baffled after all. The canyon is too wide above this, for them to leap it. Perhaps they'll believe we are still on this side, creeping away among the rocks."

"You're right, Arthur," said Day, acting upon the suggestion, leading the way with Edith.

The savage yells sounded still nearer, as the quartet leaped the canyon, and trusting that the detour would throw the Indians off their

trail, Day decided to press on without delay and endeavor to reach the desert, running the risk of meeting enemies in their front. If risky, it seemed the best course left them.

But the fates seemed conspiring against them. Scarcely had they wound through the rocks half a mile, after leaping the canyon, than Edith's horse, a high-spirited mustang, tossed its head aloft and uttered a shrill neigh. Like an echo came an answering whicker from behind a distant point of rocks, and the next moment a mounted savage bounded out into full view. It was an Apache warrior, in all the glory of his national dress.

The savage yelled loudly, as he brandished his spear, devilish exultation imprinted upon every feature of his coarse, repulsive face. Answering yells came from beyond the mass of rocks, from the higher ground to the left, and from beyond the canyon. Only one route seemed open to the fugitives; and that led them still deeper into the labyrinthine recesses of that gloomy, awe-inspiring region of nature's weird, most fantastic mood.

"At least one devil shall not live to exult over us!" gritted Day, his rifle-muzzle rising.

A sharp report, then the mustang leaped snorting away, riderless. The Apache brave lay upon the rocks, a tiny stream of blood trickling from beneath the painted helmet, dead.

"Lead the way, Tom—no more fooling," sternly cried Arthur Hamilton as Day recoiled his rifle, a deadly glow filling his eyes—the ardor of battle upon him—the thirst for blood tingling in every vein and tearing at his heart. "Remember who is depending upon us."

Thus reminded, Day grasped the rein of Edith's horse and trotted rapidly along in the only direction that seemed left free for their passage. After them came Arthur and Ella, close behind each other. And now on in full view yelped a score of Apaches, urging on their half-wild ponies at reckless, breakneck speed.

It was a wild, terrible race. The horses stumbled over loose stones, leaped across jagged boulders, squeezed through narrow passages where the trail was scarce broad enough to accommodate a single footman, leaped across deep pits and yawning chasms, more than once narrowly escaping a fall that could only be death to both horse and rider; at times they trotted along a narrow trail where, upon one side rose a high and precipitous wall or cliff, upon the other yawned an almost bottomless abyss or canyon. Yet the animals seemed to have caught the infection from their riders, forgetting all fear, only striving the one to distance its pursuer, the other to overtake the fugitives.

It was a race that words are powerless to describe. Black death hovered over both fugitives and pursuers, his icy-cold hand seeming with each moment about to close upon their lives; yet that moment passed and another one came, scarcely less perilous—and still the race continued, madly, recklessly, yet unattended as yet with the seemingly inevitable catastrophe.

But the end was near at hand. The fugitives were entering what seemed a pass between two

masses of rock. The trail grew narrower and more difficult, affording barely room for one horse to pass at a time.

Tom Day led the way. Then came Edith; after her Ella, with Arthur Hamilton bringing up the rear. For nearly half a mile the fugitives trotted as rapidly as possible along the perilous trail. Then a cry of joy broke from Day's lips, and his horse wheeled abruptly to the right, a few moments later emerging into a broad and comparatively level basin, surrounded upon all sides by high, frowning hills.

The bright light died from his eyes. A stern despair settled in its stead. He saw that further flight would be in vain. The huge masses of gray rock around barred the way. He had run blindly into a trap. Nothing remained for it but to fight; and the enemy were at least ten to one!

"On to the mesa yonder—if we can gain its top, we can sicken these devils before we go under!" he cried, boldly.

But no voice answered him, though Edith's horse sprang even with his own. Quickly turning his head, he glanced back. A cry of horror broke from his lips. He and Edith alone occupied the valley! Where were Ella and Arthur?

As if in answer, the Apaches burst out from the pass, yelling like fiends as they discovered the two fugitives. The peril that threatened Edith recalled Day to his senses, and he urged the horses around, just as a volley of arrows fell at their feet. The Apaches were firing low. Day uttered a furious curse as he saw this. He knew what it meant. They wished to cripple the animals, so they could take the fugitives alive.

A few yards further, Edith's horse stumbled and fell, but the quick eye and ready arm of her lover saved her from harm. His arm was around her waist and a single motion lifted her to the pommel of his saddle.

His own horse uttered a snort of pain, and plunged heavily on. An arrow quivered deep in his hind leg. Another strikes him, but he has done his duty. He reels and falls at the foot of the square block of stone; the mesa.

"Have courage and I will save you, darling!" breathed the soldier, as he alighted upon his feet. "Cling tightly round my waist, and never fear."

His hands thus free, with strength and skill lent by the desperate nature of the case, and his intense love for the maiden whose more than life depended solely upon his exertions, Day seized the jagged points of rocks and dragged himself and precious burden up the almost precipitous side of the mesa.

For a moment the Apaches stared in mute wonder at such an Herculean feat; but then the fear that their anticipated victims would after all baffle them, changed this sentiment to deadly rage, and the arrows began to rattle viciously against the rock.

"Clutch the vine and drag yourself up—now, your feet upon my shoulder—spring, for your life! Thank God!"

The last words broke from his lips with a gasp as Edith sprang upon the mesa top, and the next moment he was beside her.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SWARM OF HORNETS.

A STERN, impressive quietness settled over the emigrants remaining at the wagon-train, as their comrades rode boldly out to search for the wanderers, in the very face of an overwhelming force of Apaches. Leaning upon their rifles, they watched the horsemen rapidly ride over the sandy waste, in gloomy silence. Then, as naught but a dust-cloud remained, Jack Wilson spoke:

"We'd better kiver up what's left of the boys now. This sun won't improve 'em any, I don't reckon."

"We'll have to drag the red varmints off a ways, too. They'd soon stink us out, ef we don't."

"Let that be now. Mebbe we won't need the trouble. When we git through 'th this job, I've got somethin' to say. Come, turn out the tools an' let's git to work."

Strong hands made quick work of the task, and the loose sand flew aside in showers, as the wide grave deepened. And then the seven stiff, lifeless forms were gently carried out from the corral and lowered into the sandy pit, side by side. Then came a brief pause, and covert glances ran around the circle of bareheaded men. The same thought occurred to all. It seemed hard to hide those true and faithful comrades forever from human sight, without a word of prayer; yet not one among the survivors felt competent to utter those words.

Then Jack Wilson stepped forward, speaking in a low tone:

"Gentlemen, I don't see as thar's much use in waitin'. I don't reckon this 'ere gang kin pan out a single 'ligious man in its outfit. Ef the boss was here, I reckon he could say a few gospel words, but as it is, the boys 'll have to go without much prayin'. But that won't make no difference. They went under a-doin' of thar duty. They fit like white men, an' I reckon the most of 'em saved thar meat afore they passed in thar checks. I don't know as I kin say anythin' better 'n that. They was white men, plum through. So I say—may the Lord have mercy on thar souls!"

It was a unique funeral sermon, but one that came from the depths of a rude, unlettered heart, and one that touched those rough, frontier-bred men far more deeply than would have the most polished effort of an educated clergyman, for they could understand it. Then the sand was shoveled in and firmly trampled down, the surplus being cast far and wide, that the Apaches might not scent out the place and desecrate it for the sake of the scalps lying there.

"Thar—a starvin' coyote couldn't smell 'em out now, let alone the 'Patchies. An' now to bizness. Boys, be we goin' to stay here ontel the critters starve to death? Look at 'em—chawin' up the sand to git at the roots o' the grass that was sca'cely a mouthful around. How long 'll they last at this? Then when they git too weak to pull the wagons, what's to become o' us? *That's* what I want to know," somewhat doggedly said Jack Wilson.

"The boss is gone—when he comes back we kin go on," ventured one of the party.

"Jess so; but s'posin' he *don't* come back; how

then? Look here, boys, thar's some older men among ye than I be, but I don't reckon thar's any as knows more 'bout the 'Patchies than I do, or who hes traveled more in these parts. I war one o' the fu'st to step for'ard when that feller axed for volunteers. Though I knowed right well it was a fool piece o' bizness, but he said it was for the ladies, an' that word shets a man's mouth, ye see. Jess take a good squar' look at the facks; what be they?

"Thar's nigh a hundred 'Patchies swarmin' round here, jest red-hot for ha'r. Twenty men rides out into the desert. In co'se the 'Patchies knows o' this. What do they do? I kin tell ye as plain as though I see'd it all with my two eyes. They'll surround 'em, and keep swoopin' around until they pick off the last one o' the gang, or else make one big dash an' jest nat'ally ride 'em down to the airth. Then what? Why they'll come to pick up the t'other half o' the outfit, like a hungry painter, the wuss for havin' tasted blood. That's what they'll do."

"But we beat them off once—we can do it again."

"Then we was more'n double as strong as we be now. But say that we *do* beat 'em off; how long will we be able to do so here? They can rub us out 'ithout firin' a shot or burnin' a grain o' powder. The critters'd soon starve to death; then whar'd we be? We're off the main trail. Even if a train was to pass along, they couldn't see or hear us. All the 'Patchies'd have to do would be to *wait*."

"What do you propose doing then?" demanded Stevens.

"I know this route well. 'Bout seven miles over yonder is a river, small, to be sure, but chuck-full o' fish, an' thar's plenty good grass thar, too. I move le's tackle up an' make fer that," quietly replied Wilson.

"And be attacked on the road, before we could put ourselves in condition for fight? That *would* be a wise move, surely!" sneered Stevens.

"Tain't likely we'll be bothered to-day. The 'Patchies'll be busy with the boss's men. They know they kin overhaul us, with the ponies, any time they want to."

"Admitting that to be true, there is a still greater objection. Supposing our friends are hard pressed by the Apaches, as you say is sure to be the case, and they retreat here, only to find that we had deserted them, what would be the result? No, sir, I for one, will never consent to such a move. Here I remain until our friends return. And every true man in the outfit will stand by me in this," firmly cried Stevens.

"Putt the question, an' ef they say stay, I'm agreeable. I don't valie my life no more nor any other man," said Wilson.

The resolve was almost unanimous to remain at the mesa, at least during that day and night. Then, unless the party had returned, they could still try Wilson's plan.

"It'll be too late then; but never mind. I'm with ye to the eend," the borderer quietly replied. "You'll find out afore long which was right—him or me."

The hours dragged slowly, wearily enough to the emigrants as they lounged about their corral, guarding the mules as they grubbed in the

sand for a few scanty roots of grass. It was a long, dreary, soul-sickening vigil. But the end came suddenly.

"The devil is comin', boys!" yelled Wilson, who was one of those guarding the mules. "Look to the critters, or thar'll be a stampede!"

Instantly every man sprung into full life and activity. But in this case haste proved the worst speed. The mules took fright at the shouts and eager advance of the emigrants, and plunged here and there, more than one pulling up his picket-pin, and galloping away over the sands, braying and whickering loudly.

Already the heavy thud of horses' hoofs, advancing at full speed, came to the ears of the startled emigrants. The Apaches had taken advantage of the *mesa*, and by keeping it between them and the corral, managed to approach within half a mile before being discovered. Then, seeing that further creeping would be useless, they raised their war-cry and dashed on at headlong speed, hoping to gain the wagons while the defenders were yet in a state of confusion.

"Let the cursed critters go to the devil an' save yourselves!" shouted Wilson, choosing the lesser evil of the two. "Quick—an' make every shot count, or we're gone suckers!"

Abandoning the mules to their fate, the emigrants scrambled over the barricade and clutched their rifles and shot-guns, just as the yelling Apaches swept around both ends of the *mesa*. Thus, ere a shot was fired, the antagonists were separated only by a few yards, as the half-wild ponies dashed up to the wagons.

Then the fire-arms began to speak, and the arrows to hiss through the wagon covers or interstices, and the long lances to be thrust forward wherever a foeman was visible.

The Apaches were the survivors of the desert fight—or rather series of fights—in which Mustang Sam played such a prominent part. Defeated there, awed by the stern, impenetrable front ever presented by the emigrants, they remembered the weakened train, and resolved to deal a blow there, feeling that thus deprived of their prime mode of conveyance, the indomitable band must sooner or later fall into their hands. And in this attack, the Apaches showed truly wonderful nerve and insensibility to death. They seemed madmen, rather than usually prudent warriors. Their ranks thinned rapidly, yet they paid no attention to this, only pressing the emigrants the harder, evidently resolved to capture the train at any cost.

The emigrants, too, fought desperately, as men with halters round their necks. With them it was truly victory or death. They must either conquer or die. And knowing this they fought with sullen, stubborn fury. It was a duel to the death.

Swiftly their guns were emptied. Then the revolvers spoke. The foremost Apaches melted away before that terrible fusilade as hoar frost dissolves before the warm breath of the morning sun. Yet others pressed forward to supply their places, plying bow and arrows, or the long vicious spear, with fatal dexterity.

Rushing their animals fairly against the barricade, the Apaches leaped upon the wagon-tops, seeking to carry the corral thus. At first the adventurous braves fell as rapidly as they

gained the top, but then as the withering fusilade began to slacken several succeeded in gaining the inside; only to be felled with rifle or pistol-butts, or the blood-dripping bowie-knife.

It was a horrible, soul-sickening scene—one that my pen is powerless to describe.

Slowly but surely the Apaches gained ground, as the defenders grew less and more feeble. Two-thirds of their number dead, the remainder wounded, the emigrants still fought stoutly, desperately. It was now hand-to-hand. The Apaches had gained entrance in numbers that would not be denied. The pale-faces were pressed back by mere weight of numbers, until the face of the *mesa* prevented further retreat. And here, their backs guarded by the rocks, half a dozen men faced two-score of savages, who were eagerly pressing them to death.

For a full minute the Apaches were held at bay. Then—one irresistible rush—and the fight was ended. The last of the heroic band was down. The wagon-train was captured. And wild, shrill, triumphant rose the yells of the savages at this; for the moment they forgot the fearful loss they had sustained, in the intoxicating sense of victory.

The red rays of the setting sun shone vividly over the vast expanse of the desert sands and rock-hills beyond. But the captured train was cast in the deep, somber shadow of the *mesa*. It seemed as though the sight was too horrible, too sickening for the sun to look upon.

Then the yells ceased. The living Apaches forced their way out from the corral, dragging with them three bodies—or rather captives. One was Jack Wilson. It was not by his own will that he was taken alive—that he had not shared the fate of his brave comrades. He had fought desperately to the last—until the Apaches flung themselves bodily upon him, and crushed him helpless to the earth. This was from no sentiment of mercy. No; the three white men were doomed to suffer a thousand deaths in one.

The Apaches quickly plundered the wagon, strewing the sands for yards around with plunder, useful and useless; the former was then pitched into the corral, on top of the scalpless whites. The three captives were stripped of their clothing, and then securely bound to the rear ends of as many wagons. Then, yelling, screeching, brandishing their blood-stained weapons and gory scalps, the Apaches danced before them.

A brave clutched each captive by the hair. A knife-blade glittered in the twilight. Agonizing shrieks break the air. The skulls of the prisoners drip blood. They are scalpless!

Again the dusky-skinned demons dance around in mad glee. But the captives are almost past noticing them now.

Then a torch flashes upon the dusk. A moment later, the blaze deepens as the wagon-covers catch. Slowly the wood ignites. The bonfire gains fresh strength with every moment. The wagons were fairly ignited. And once more the demons resume their mad dance.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CUL-DE-SAC.

WHERE was Ella Heflin and Arthur Hamil-

ten? What had happened to them? Could it be that the Apaches had ridden them down, either slaying or taking them prisoners, while the majority pressed on in hot pursuit of Day and Edith?

This was the sickening fear that assailed the last two, even in the face of their own extreme peril. And indeed that seemed the only plausible solution.

Yet there was another solution, the correct one.

The canyon was a broad and deep one. Along the right-hand side of this canyon extended a narrow, level shelf or ledge of rock. Over this course the race for life or death led, and as before stated, an abrupt curve in the trail led Tom Day and Edith Bland out into the circular, basin-like valley. But only enemies followed them.

Ella Heflin clung convulsively to the saddle, but she was almost insensible with fear and horror. With every movement it seemed as though she must be hurled over the ledge, down upon the cruel rocks below, to inevitable death, and, woman-like, she closed her eyes not to witness her own death.

Close behind her rode Hamilton, with drawn revolver. The yells sounded louder and more distinct, and he instinctively turned his head to glance back. In that moment the division was effected.

A fragment of rock, frost-eaten and crumbling, shaken from its resting-place by the clatter of hoofs, fell with a rattling sound to the trail, directly before Ella's horse. With a quick snort the mustang shied, and instead of following after the animal ridden by Edith, kept straight ahead.

Arthur was just in time to see the animal disappear around the curve, and naturally supposing that Day had chosen that trail, followed on. A moment later, and he too was hidden from view around the curve, and for several hundred yards he did not notice the mistake, so great was his excitement.

Then Ella's mustang slackened its pace, bending its head low down, snorting tremulously. Arthur parted his lips to urge Ella forward, when a faint cry of horror broke from his lips.

Quivering in every limb, the mustang sunk back upon its haunches, closely pressing against the rock-wall. The frost-eaten rock beneath its feet was crumbling, rolling significantly down the side of the canyon. Already the left fore-foot of the mustang could obtain no secure support, but pawed frantically against the crumbling mass, unconsciously precipitating the end.

"Arthur—save me—oh God! have mercy!" gasped Ella, as her drooping lids raised and the full extent of her peril was realized.

"I will—clear your feet of the stirrup—quick!" hurriedly said Hamilton, thrusting the pistol into his breast.

His hands thus at liberty, he rose in the saddle and made a quick leap forward. It was a bold deed, for he could not see the footing that awaited him, and there was scarce room to pass between the head and haunches of the frightened horses.

Yet, had he used more prudence, he would have been too late,

Arthur alighted safe between the two animals, and then flung his arms around Ella's waist. In doing so, he was forced to lean heavily against the mustang's haunches, and that completed the work. With an almost human shriek of terror, the animal flung up its head and plunged madly out from the broken ledge, furiously pawing the unresisting air. Down—down! then a dull, sickening thud came up from the gloomy depths below.

For a moment it seemed as though Ella and Arthur must follow the mustang. With a strength lent him by the frightful peril, Hamilton lifted the maiden clear of the saddle, just as the horse plunged down to death, but the effort overbalanced him. They tottered upon the narrow ledge. The cruel abyss seemed drawing them into its embrace of death. Ella fairly overhung the canyon. By slackening his grip in the least, Arthur would have been saved. Alone, unincumbered, he could easily have regained his balance. But that thought never once occurred to him. Together they would live—or else find a grave in common upon the jagged boulders below.

But such was not to be the ending. As Hamilton flung out his free hand, seeking thus to regain his balance, it touched the reins of his horse, and closed upon them with the tenacity of despair. Snorting, trembling in every fiber, the animal flung back its head, though fearing to retreat an inch. And that saved the couple. Aided by the sudden jerk, Hamilton drew back from the abyss, and with Ella tight clasped to his breast, leaned against the rock wall, faint and sick.

Though so brief, it had been a killing struggle, such as rarely comes more than once in a lifetime. His brain reeling, the young man panted for breath. And Ella lay passive upon his breast, for she had fainted, as the frightful death stared her in the face.

To his dazed eyes she looked like one dead, and that terrible thought roused him. Murmuring her name, he pressed his lips to hers repeatedly, passionately calling her to look up, to live for his sake.

How much longer he might have continued this lover-like but not remarkably sensible proceeding, had not an interruption come, is a matter of conjecture. Several quickly succeeding reports came distinctly to his ear, mingled with shrill, vindictive yells—the Apache battle-cry.

Clasping Ella's form still tighter to his breast, Arthur glanced quickly around, drawing a revolver. But the expected sight did not meet his gaze. Not an Indian was to be seen; only the crouching, trembling horse, pressing tightly against the wall, unable to advance further, afraid to retreat, since it was impossible to turn around upon that narrow point.

Then the truth flashed upon Hamilton, like a revelation. He remembered the side passage but a few score yards away, and knew that Day and Edith had taken that, followed by all the Apaches; else the savages would have put in an appearance before this. The rifle-shots plainly told that Day had been overtaken and was selling his life dearly.

Had Arthur been alone, he would not have

hesitated a single moment. He would have braved all danger to lend his friend a helping hand. But he held a helpless woman in his arms who must die unless he could save her.

"I can't desert you, my darling!" he breathed, pressing his lips to hers. "I will save you or we will die together—and then you will know how dearly I love you!"

With a single glance he took in the situation. It was impossible to pass by the trembling horse, bearing Ella. The ledge made another abrupt bend, but did not seem to entirely run out. If he could pass the spot where the frost-eaten rock had given way beneath the mustang, all might yet be well. The venture would be risky; the rock was shaky and infirm, but that was the only course left for him.

Breathing a silent prayer, the young man cautiously made the venture. Once a fragment of rock gave way beneath his foot, clattering down the side of the canyon, almost destroying his balance, but catching upon a point of rock, Arthur saved himself and precious burden, though his blood stained the ragged projection. Then, drawing a long breath, he found himself safely past the worst.

A quick, tremulous whicker broke the air, and Ella uttered a faint cry of alarm, as her eyes once more opened. The sound seemed to break the stupor that had chained her brain.

"Thank God! I began to think you were dead!"

"That noise—the Indians—where are we?"

"We are safe as yet—do not be alarmed. My horse does not fancy being left alone, and I must go see to him. You are not afraid to be alone for a moment?"

"Not—not if you will return soon," faltered Ella.

Arthur cautiously retraced his steps, and the next moment stood before the trembling horse. It was a hard task that Hamilton had set himself, but he believed that both Ella's and his own safety depended upon it. The frightened animal would continue its whickerings until it guided the Apaches along the trail they had temporarily lost; and that thought nerved Arthur's hand.

Firmly clutching the bridle-reins, he plunged his knife deep into the animal's throat. Starting back with the pain, a quick wrench upon the reins completed the work. The horse, after a vain struggle, fell from the ledge, into the abyss.

"Poor devil! It seemed like murder—but it had to be done," muttered Hamilton, hastily wiping the hot blood from his hand, and then retracing his steps to where Ella stood, trembling with a vague fear.

A little cry of joy broke from her lips as Arthur returned, and his cheek flushed hotly, for he could no longer mistake the love-light that burned in Ella's eyes. But the words that trembled upon his lips were driven back by the renewed sounds of firing, mingled with savage yells and whoops.

"Come—we must flee. Close your eyes and lean upon me. I will guide you safe," he hurriedly muttered, passing an arm around the trembling form.

They had advanced scarce a dozen yards, when

Arthur paused, with a bitter curse. The passage was barred by a perpendicular wall. The ledge ran abruptly out.

"We must go back, and trust to passing the point unseen by the Apaches. Once past, we may—"

"Too late!" gasped Ella, despairingly.

A series of yells broke the air, coming from the point toward which they had turned their faces. The truth could no longer be doubted. The Apaches had missed them, and returning upon their trail, had discovered the second ledge. Even upon the hard rock, their eagle eyes could trace where the horses had passed.

"Crouch down in that corner, Ella. You will be safe there, for a time at least. Those devils will find it no child's play. They can come only one at a time. If they take our lives, they shall pay a dear price for them," quietly said Hamilton, kneeling before Ella, with a cocked revolver resting upon his left arm, its muzzle commanding the narrow ledge where it wound round the point.

The maiden bowed her head upon her lap, covering her ears to shut out the terrifying shrieks. Pale and stern, his nerves firm as steel, Arthur knelt there and awaited the assault.

They were not long kept in suspense. A sharp cry told that the Apaches had gained the point where the two horses had met their death. The fresh blood-traces evidently surprised them. How came it there?

But one impatient brave did not pause to speculate upon this, and light-footed as a deer, sure as a mountain-goat, he passed the crumbling rock, and turned the curve. A brief glimpse of two figures met his eyes; but the yell of discovery changed to a wild, horrible death-shriek, as he flung up his arms, then toppled over, falling swiftly down the abyss.

A revolver-bullet had ended his mortal career. But it told the Apaches plainly that their prey was close at hand, and with cries of mingled rage and triumph, they rushed forward, with far more haste than prudence.

Never calmer, Arthur Hamilton recoiled his revolver, and covered the spot where the Apaches must first reveal themselves. The moment a dusky figure appeared, he fired. Again the terrible yell arose, again a human form plunged swiftly down the canyon, where the jagged rocks quickly extinguished what life the leaden missile had left in the body.

The Apaches pressed on with a strange want of caution; they seemed resolved to conquer, at any loss. But as rapidly the pistols spoke, and at that short distance—scarcely twenty feet—a far less accurate shot than Hamilton would have made every missile count.

Such slaughter could not last long. The Apaches sickened of it first, as was but natural. They were picked off as rapidly as they could pass the crumbling point in the ledge, without being able to discharge a single arrow at the pale-face. Little wonder then that they fell back with yells of rage and dismay.

"Ella, thank God that we are saved for this time!" said Hamilton, when fully assured that the Apaches had retreated.

"I do—but how will it end? We are in a

trap; there is no way of escape except by that—and *they* are there."

"True. It may be best to look the worst full in the face," said Arthur, gaining the maiden's side, as he deftly reloaded his weapons. "You are not afraid to look death in the face. Yet it is hard for one so young and lovely to die—and by such hands! If I could save you, I would not care for myself—"

"We will die together," softly uttered Ella.

Something in her tone startled Arthur, and his eyes quickly sought hers. For a moment he doubted, his breath coming quick and uneven. But then the glorious truth burst upon him. He knew that he was loved—that his passion was returned. The dark eyes told him that.

"Ah, my darling!" he murmured, as he wound his arms tightly around her form, drawing her close to his throbbing heart, and then their lips met in the long, lingering kiss of pure love.

For a time they were lost to all else—the knowledge that they loved and were beloved in return. The past trials, the danger that even then threatened them, the unknown fate of their late companions—all was forgotten in that supreme moment. Heart to heart, lip to lip, they were in paradise.

And around the rock point, a grim, painted form crept stealthily nearer the lovers, with its mouth full of arrows, a strong bow in its hand. They did not hear the faint rustling as he crept along the ledge.

Stealthily the savage crept on, until the black, glittering eyes could peer around the point. A venomous light filled their depths, as he discovered the clinging figures and an arrow was notched to the string. Anxious to make a sure shot, the savage glided still nearer, until fairly round the point. Then the bow was raised and the arrow drawn back.

At that moment Ella raised her eyes and beheld the peril. With a gasping cry she pushed Arthur violently to one side, just as the bow-string twanged. The arrow passed between their heads, tearing a lock from the maiden's side hair, then expending its force upon the rock beyond.

Arthur hastily flung forward his pistol and fired, just as the Apache fitted a second shaft. The bullet struck the rock wall, then glanced, casting a shower of flinty particles into the Indian's face with stinging force. Blinded, confused, he started convulsively. It was a fatal act. Losing his balance he fell over the ledge. One shrill scream—then a heavy *thud*!

Yelling madly, the Apaches charged. Arthur rushed forward to meet them, his revolvers speaking rapidly. Again death reigned triumphant in that *cul-de-sac*!

CHAPTER IX.

A BRIDGE OF HAIR.

BUT this did not last long. The Apaches soon shrunk back from before the deadly revolvers. The partial success of their bold comrade had momentarily encouraged them to rush forward, hoping to take the pale-face in a measure off his guard. No sooner did they realize the folly of this hope than the survivors turned and shrunk back once more beyond the death-point.

Brushing the perspiration from his brow, Hamilton hastily reloaded his pistol, keeping close watch upon the ledge, half anticipating another attack. Tremblingly Ella crept to his side, feeling safer when within reach of his strong arm. Arthur stooped and touched her lips gently, saying:

"I owe my life to you, little one. Only for that quick push, I would be dead now."

"And so would I, even if I had to follow our poor horses, I will never fall alive into *their* hands. But are they gone—can we go now, back to the wagons?"

Arthur smiled sadly, as he drew her yielding form closer to his side, yet not so far forgetting himself as before.

"No, little one—they are still watching us. They will never leave us in peace again. I have killed some of their braves, and they will never rest until they take my scalp in payment.

"Then we—we can not—get away from them?"

"My darling, it is hard—very hard to have to tell you as much, but you must be brave and try to bear it. It is best to know the worst at once. We *can not* escape—nothing short of a miracle can save our lives. The red demons hold the pass, and if we were to attempt to escape by it, they would shoot us down like wolves. And it may come to that yet; or else we must stay here until thirst and starvation does its work. And that will not be long—you are not strong," gloomily responded Arthur Hamilton.

"I am stronger than you think—if I am only a girl. And then, if they can keep us in here, we can keep them out yonder," bravely responded Ella, though her lip quivered pitifully.

"Yes, and if the worst comes, we always have *one* mode of escape from the Apaches," and Arthur glanced down into the canyon depths, now dim and indistinct as the twilight deepened. "But that is a last resource. See! I have a pint of water in my canteen yet, and two sandwiches. Do you take charge of them, Ella. Unless you are *very* hungry, it would be wisest to save them until morning. For when they are gone, our hopes are small indeed."

Night settled over the desert and rock-hills. Side by side the lovers crouched upon the cheerless rocks, their eyes riveted upon the point of rock around which the Apaches must pass in order to reach them. Tired and weary, neither dared to close their eyes in sleep, lest that moment should be chosen by the vindictive, unrelenting enemy for an attack. In vain Arthur besought Ella to leave him and lie down at the further end of the ledge, where she could sleep in comparative safety. It was only when she could feel the reassuring pressure of his strong arm that she felt safe. And thus, his arm around her waist, her head pillowed upon his heart, Ella at length fell asleep, utterly worn out.

For hours Arthur remained thus, fearing to move lest he should disturb her peaceful slumber, even when his arm grew numb and his whole person cramped. With revolvers cocked and ready, he watched the point of rock through that live-long night, disturbed only once. The rapid sound of firing came indistinctly to his

ears, rousing him from a half-stupor. But the Apaches did not attack or attempt to surprise him. And then the gray light in the east bokened the birth of a new day.

The sun had climbed high into the sky before Ella awoke, which she finally did with a start and bewildered stare, then shrinking away from Arthur with a hot blush. But immediately, as if remembering what had passed between them on the day before, she nestled close beside him, and did not refuse the lips when he bent his head to kiss her.

"I had a nice sleep—and oh! such pleasant dreams! I thought we were once more with our friends, and—"

"And what, darling?" asked Arthur as she suddenly hesitated.

"Nothing much. I'll tell you some time, perhaps; not now. But you—you look pale and ill—you have kept awake all night!"

"Yes—I did not know at what moment those demons might venture an attack. But it was not very hard—for I was watching over you, little one," replied Hamilton.

"Perhaps that is what made me dream," laughed the maiden, with a little of her old archness. "But now you must take some rest. Go and lie down. I will watch."

"What if the Apaches should come? What would you do?" and Arthur laughed slightly.

"I could shoot them—at least keep them at bay until you awakened. Give me one of the pistols. You guarded me all night; surely I can watch over you for a little while now."

"I am a man—you a dear little woman, too—"

"There—no more slander, if you please. I will have it so! Besides, what will you do if we are still here to-night? You cannot go without sleep forever."

"You promise to awaken me in an hour, then?"

"Just as soon as there is any danger, I will awaken you."

"Very well, I will take a nap, then, for I am about worn out. But first—you must have your breakfast. You are starving," and Arthur produced the scanty supply of food and water that alone stood between them and starvation.

"Divide it, then. I will only share equally with you," and Ella remained firm in this determination, despite Hamilton's entreaties, declaring that he was not a bit hungry or thirsty.

Seeing that Ella would not relent, he divided the food, and made a pretense of eating, though he carefully put the food away for her. And though his throat was parched with thirst, he barely suffered the water to touch his lips; not a drop passed his throat.

Then, while Ella took her position, with cocked revolver in her hand, he lay down upon the rocks and almost immediately fell asleep.

It was late in the afternoon before Arthur awoke, and he gently chided Ella for having allowed him to slumber so long, but her excuse lay in his sparkling eye and revived spirits. Though suffering keenly from thirst and hunger, Hamilton was now more like himself, and began trying to devise some mode of escape from their perilous situation.

The long silence of the Apaches—for nearly twenty hours had elapsed since their last attack

—gave birth to a new hope. Might not they have retreated for good, disheartened by their repeated losses and inability to inflict any injury upon the pale-faces? It would seem so. And yet, such was scarcely the Apache nature.

With Ella's life depending upon him, as her only earthly protector, Arthur resolved to settle these doubts, and learn whether the savages were still guarding the ledge, or had departed for once and all. Yet he did not forget prudence.

Making a ball of his coat-sleeves, covered with a white handkerchief, upon which he drew rude representations of a man's features, he covered all with his hat, and then cautiously protruded it around the point. And now he saw the prudence of his course.

A dozen arrows struck the effigy, and yells of devilish exultation filled the air. Hastily dropping the lay figure, Arthur drew his pistols and leaped back a few paces.

The Apaches once more rushed headlong to their death, believing that their desperate enemy had fallen, for that their shot had taken effect, they could not doubt. But the first brave who showed himself at the point tottered back into the canyon with a bullet in his heart, and a second received a shattered arm. The survivors sullenly retreated, confirmed in their belief that more than one enemy defended the pass, and resolved that nothing should drive them from their former intention; they would starve the pale-faces into submission.

Just before the sun went down, Arthur made a discovery that for a moment curdled his blood. Almost directly opposite his position, he noticed a considerable crevice in the wall of rock. The manner in which the rays of the setting sun shone through this, told him plainly that it was the end of a passage extending through the rocks probably to the open ground beyond. Had the Apaches noticed this? If so, they could easily secure their game with but little danger. By gaining the opposite side of the canyon and following this passage, they would hold the pale-faces completely at their mercy. A single flight of arrows would end the matter.

With this new fear to trouble him, Arthur did not close an eyelid that night, Ella sleeping soundly at his side. Nothing occurred to disturb his vigil except once; the sound of fire-arms once more came from beyond the rock-wall. Could it be possible that Tom Day still lived—was still defending himself against the savages? The idea was banished as one of utter folly. The firing must proceed from the Apaches.

But then a sickening terror crept upon him. The night was still, not a breath of air stirring. Yet stealthy sounds came to his ears from across the canyon. He believed his worst fears about to come true; that the Apaches had gained the crevice opposite, and were only awaiting the coming dawn to riddle his body with their arrows.

It was an hour of terrible, soul-sickening suspense, such as might well blanch a stout man's hair from black to white. Yet Arthur had one strangely soothing thought. If he died it would not be alone. He remembered the pledge Ella had extracted from him; that he would kill her

with his own hand rather than suffer her to fall alive into the clutches of those demons. And he resolved to do his duty. If not in life, at least they would be united in death.

Gently he roused Ella, and whispered to her his fears. For a moment she quailed; then twining her arms round him she repeated her request. In silence he cocked his revolvers and pressed the black muzzle against her temple. Thus they waited. The first arrow shot would be the signal for their death.

As the gray light softened, Hamilton could distinguish several shadowy figures upon the ledge beyond, and heard the subdued murmur of voices. A moment later, he heard a slight noise upon the ledge around the point, and with stern despair, turned that way, resolved to deal one more death before giving up life.

He heard the twanging of bows, and then a slight commotion upon the other side of the canyon, followed by a fierce, sonorous curse. Petrified with astonishment, he could scarce believe his ears. No red-skin could ever utter such a full deep-chested oath!

"Scatter, boys—we've run into a nest o' ho'nets!"

All doubt was now dissipated. The figures in the crevice beyond were white men, and enemies to the Apaches, who had fired upon them. Knowing that they must be his friends, from that, Hamilton cried aloud:

"For God's sake do not desert us, if ye be men! A lady here asks your aid—do not leave her to die by the hands of these accursed Apaches!"

"Who are you—who is with you?" eagerly cried a tremulous voice.

"Arthur Hamilton—and Miss Heflin is with me."

A cry of heartfelt joy—a groan of sickening apprehension greeted this announcement; the one from Thomas Heflin, the other from Edward Bland.

Ella recognized her father's voice as she awoke from her sleep, and with one glad cry—believing with all a daughter's beautiful faith, that he would assuredly save her from death—over-tasked nature gave way and she fainted.

"Back, man—be ye crazy?" cried Mustang Sam, as the Apaches' arrows began to cross the canyon in swift succession. "We must 'tend to them critters fu'st. Look to your rifles—hand 'em to me as fast as I fire."

His rifle spoke, and a wild yell told how truly. Another weapon was handed him, and was discharged with like result. But that was all. The Apaches could not stand such deadly compliments, and hastily retreated deeper into the shadows, their bows silenced.

There was now sufficient light for the parties to dimly distinguish each other, and a hasty explanation ensued. Though Hamilton believed in his heart that Tom Day and Edith Bland were both dead, he could not say as much in the face of the father, and alluded to the recent firing beyond the hill as though it proceeded from them.

"It was that brung us here," said Mustang Sam. "That an' some shootin' we heard afore. But now, how to git across this cussed ditch?

It's no use tryin' to go around; we did try that last night, when we found the way blocked, an' both ends lead to the devil an' back ag'in. Let me think a bit."

"If you have any water and food with you, for mercy sake try and get it across, for we are almost starved!"

Some bits of dried meat were promptly flung across, and Sweetman, emptying the little remaining whisky from his leathern flask, filled it from a canteen, and tossed it to Arthur. The next minute thirst was appeased.

"Say, young man, look around ye. Is thar any stout point of rock you could tie a rope to?" suddenly called the Mustang.

"Yes—here is one that will do."

"Then we'll fix it! Boys, you keep the red-skins quiet. Don't let 'em slip a arrer into me, ef ye kin help it. Now!"

While speaking Mustang Sam unwound the horse-hair lasso round his body, and flung the noosed end to Arthur, who, first padding the rock with his coat, firmly noosed the lasso around the spur. Its strength was then tested by several of the emigrants tugging with all their power, but the noose and rock resisted the strain, and Mustang Sam tied the rope in like manner upon his side of the canyon. Then renewing his caution to the emigrants, he boldly advanced and grasped the taut rope, swinging himself over the ledge, dangling above the canyon, crossing it hand over hand.

An arrow hissed viciously past his face, grazing the muscles of his left arm, numbing it so that his fingers relaxed and the member dropped helplessly by his side. A cry of horror broke from the whites at this, and they expected to see their bold leader dashed to death upon the rocks below; all but Sweetman. His rifle spoke, and the exultant yells of the Apaches turned to dismay, as their boldest brave fell dead into the abyss.

"Bully fer you, Beauty!" cried Mustang coolly swinging by one hand. "But shoot a little quicker next time. The varmint 'most did fer me that pop!"

A moment later he was crossing, the momentary numbness gone from his arm. Arthur assisted him to climb upon the ledge, and then they encouraged the others to follow. The feat was more dangerous to the imagination than in reality, only for the Apaches, the distance was so short.

In a very short time all but two men had crossed in safety, and Mustang Sam bade them wait there with their rifles in readiness, until he cleared the pass of the Apaches. Then with drawn revolvers the emigrants followed his lead around the point, their passage being undisputed, for the red-skins knew that it would be fatal to expose themselves to the aim of the rifles across the canyon. But a rattling, thumping sound echoed through the pass, though the authors were hidden from view. Mustang Sam uttered a bitter curse.

"Follow me—they're blockin' up the pass! Quick! or we're trapped for sure!"

With a wild cheer the emigrants followed his lead. But at the second leap, Mustang Sam paused and glanced around. A significant sound came to their ears.

CHAPTER X.

THE SOLDIER ON GUARD.

IN the mountain, how fared it with Tom Day and Edith Bland? Our last glimpse of them left them in a situation of imminent peril.

Panting, almost breathless with his terrible exertions, the soldier followed Edith Bland to the top of the rock. With yells of angry chagrin, the Apaches continued their shower of arrows, charging madly up to the foot of the *mesa*, upon their fiery little ponies.

Tom Day realized his peril—he saw that the savages meant to overcome him in one stern rush, and while pushing Edith down upon the rock, to guard her against the hissing arrows, he drew a revolver. Crouching down upon the edge of the *mesa*, he opened a rapid, telling fire upon the savages as they crowded around the base, striving to scale the almost perpendicular side of the rock. In their excitement the savages did not appear to notice this, until two of their number had fallen, one dead, the other mortally wounded. But then as the vicious reports continued, their chief uttered a peculiar yell, and the savages darted back beyond pistol range.

The respite was most opportune, since it gave the soldier time to look around and take in his situation.

There was no ground or point of rocks within rifle-range that was high enough to command the top of the *mesa*. Thus nothing but a direct assault could conquer him, and the face of the rock was so nearly perpendicular that Tom believed not more than two or three savages could scale it at a time, and then be so difficult that he stood a fair chance of picking them off one after another with his revolver before they could gain a foothold.

Resolved to know every point, the soldier crept along the edges and carefully examined every side of the *mesa*, though while thus occupied he ran no small risk by being picked off by the Apache marksmen who lay behind the adjacent boulders. A few minutes sufficed for this, and his heart was considerably lightened as he found that only one side of the *mesa* could be scaled by man. The defense promised to be an easier task than he had at first supposed.

"Courage, Edith!" said the soldier, regaining the maiden's side, "courage—all is not lost yet."

"They have not—not run away for good?"

"No—they haven't sense enough for that. They're all around us, hidden among the rocks and holes, waiting for us to fall gently into their clutches, no doubt. I only hope they'll know it when we do, the greasy, painted, cowardly varmints!" half-laughed Tom, yet, with an ill-concealed uneasiness in his manner that did not escape the quick-witted girl.

"You need not try to hide your thoughts from me, dear Tom," Edith said, faintly smiling as her tiny gloved hand sought his broad, firm palm. "I am no longer a silly child—I do not feel like the same person—these few hours have greatly altered me. I can face the worst—if worst must come. At least we will not be separated."

The soldier was deeply affected by these words, so quietly, simply spoken, and as he attempted a reply, the words stuck in his throat,

and he could only draw the lithe, yielding form closer to his heart, a sickening pain tearing at his heart-strings as he felt what a faint hope there was of their escape with life. It seemed doubly hard to die now; but even his naturally buoyant spirits could wrest no gleam of hope for the future from their dark surroundings.

"Hiss!" suddenly uttered Edith, drawing back her head, "what is that—that sound—do you hear it?"

For a moment the soldier seemed dazed and bewildered, and glared around with an unsteady gaze. Edith's exclamation had roused him from a momentary oblivion of the surroundings.

"That sound—what does it mean?" quickly repeated Edith, one hand pointing toward the edge of the *mesa*.

"Ha! the devils think to catch us napping!" and the soldier's eyes lighted up with the stern, deadly fire that a foeman might well dread. "Lie down close behind me, darling—I will keep them from you. Shut your eyes and pray that the varmints may be defeated!"

"Together in life or death!" Edith murmured, just touching her lips to his, then crouching low down upon the flat rock.

Resolutely choking down the swelling lump that rose in his throat, Tom Day cocked his revolver and directed his entire attention to the edge of the *mesa*. A faint, almost imperceptible rustling sound came to his ear. He knew now what it meant. The Apaches, burning with vengeance for the number of their braves that death had claimed, had crept from their rocky coverts and were now attempting to scale the stone fort.

Knowing this, a less prudent man than the soldier would have rushed forward to repulse them, while they were so busied with clinging to the almost perpendicular face of the rock, as to be unable to use their weapons for self-defense. But Day knew that the attacking party were not acting blindly—that their motions were covered by others of the Apaches, ready to send a bullet or arrow cloud to sweep clear the face of the *mesa*, should he act thus. And, feeling this, he sternly awaited the result, knowing that even more than life depended upon his exertions during the coming moments.

A faint, tremulous cry sounded upon the almost deathlike stillness; for the faint rustling noise had now ceased. As though in reply to an agreed-upon signal, a horrible, deafening clamor arose.

Wild, piercing yells rent the air, broken by an irregular volley of rifles. Lead bullets and feathered shafts hissed and hurtled viciously over the top of the *mesa*, though the crouching figures were unharmed.

The soldier smiled grimly. He knew well that this was but a blind to cover the more deadly assault to follow.

He was not long kept in suspense. Even while the valley was reverberating with the rifle-shots, several dusky hands clutched the edge of the rock, and thus assisted, the heads and shoulders of three Apaches rose above the *mesa*.

A little cry broke from Edith's lips as she caught sight of the grim, grotesquely painted faces; the keen, black eyes, filled with the fire

of deadly vengeance, that only the loss of life could extinguish.

Calm and steadily, as though aimed at the regulation target, the revolver of the soldier rose until the silver drop covered the forehead of one of the Apaches; then the hammer fell.

Almost crowning the sharp report, a horrible yell, blood-curdling in its intensity, broke from the stricken red-skin's lips as a few drops of life-blood spirted from the discolored hole that marked the passage of the unerring bullet. With a convulsive reaction of the strained muscles, the stricken savage leaped upon the *mesa*. Upon the very edge he stood for a fleeting moment, the hot life-blood pattering down upon the gray rock at his feet.

But this was only for a moment; then the erect head drooped, the muscular arms were flung aloft, and with a sickening, gurgling groan, the lifeless clay sunk backward, falling heavily over the edge of the *mesa*.

As though released from a spell by this, Day again cocked his pistol and discharged it full into the broad chest of the topmost savage. One wild bound carried the savage to his enemy, and it seemed as though the soldier had missed his aim.

But then, soon as he flung up his left arm to ward off the threatened blow, Day felt the hot life-blood sprinkling his face, and the Apache dropped the glittering blade, falling forward, dead.

Yet even in death it seemed as though he was resolved to avenge his fallen comrades, for his heavy form fell upon the crouching soldier, bearing him back upon the rock, the revolver falling from his hand in the shock.

As Day grappled with the still-quivering figure, uncertain how much life might remain, two cries saluted his ears. The third Apache leaped forward and clutched at the soldier's throat, at the same time delivering a vicious thrust with his long knife.

A momentary faintness seized upon Tom Day, as he felt the cold steel pierce his flesh, and then, as the sharp pang told him he was wounded, a mad rage seized upon him, and whirling from beneath the corpse, he desperately grappled with the Apache. Like wild beasts they rolled over and over the flat table-top, first one above, then the other, the Apache uttering his fierce war-cry, which was promptly echoed back from below, and the scrambling of moccasined feet upon the *mesa* face came quite distinctly to the ears of the antagonists.

All seemed lost. It was all that the soldier could do to keep the biting knife from his person; free himself from the vise-like grasp of the Apache he could not, without losing his hold upon the knife-hand. And that would be fatal.

But in that critical moment an unexpected ally appeared. Edith, realizing the imminent peril of her lover, sprung to her feet and clutched the half-cocked revolver that had fallen from Tom Day's hand.

Without hesitating a moment, she placed the weapon to the head of the Apache, cocking it with the same motion.

At the report, the savage fell forward, dead, his skull fairly shattered to pieces. His face covered with clotted blood and brains, almost

blinded, Tom Day flung aside the corpse and sprung to his feet. It was a well-nigh fatal action, for the marksmen below saw and recognized the figure, and discharged a hasty volley of bullets and arrows at him. This very haste probably frustrated their hopes, for, though he heard the vicious whistling of the missiles, even above the loud reports, the soldier was untouched.

This incident recalled his usual coolness, and dashing the blinding blood from his brow, Day crouched to the rock. Edith handed him the revolver, and then sunk to the rock, lifeless.

Fortunately for himself, Day did not notice this, else he might even then be conquered. Even as it was, the foremost of the Apaches was just crawling upon the *mesa* top.

At that distance—scarce ten feet—one could not miss such a target, even when trembling and panting heavily from a desperate struggle, and the grotesquely-painted face sunk back, now marked with blood.

Then seizing upon the two dead bodies, Day hurled them, one after another, over the edge of the *mesa*, smiling grimly as he heard the heavy fall of struggling bodies upon the jagged rocks beneath. The novel missiles had swept the steep ascent clear of Apaches.

"We'll whip 'em yet, Edith," muttered Day, but as no reply came, he glanced quickly around, a wild horrible fear tearing at his heart-strings.

He saw the prostrate figure—saw the upturned face was pale and ghastly as that of a corpse; and a dull, heart-breaking cry broke from his lips as he crept toward the motionless body of her he loved so well.

He could detect no breath, no beating of the pulse, no throbbing of the heart. The pale face seemed cold to his trembling touch. He felt that Edith was dead.

One more cry parted his lips.

And from below arose the shrill vindictive yells of the bloodthirsty Apaches. They seemed preparing for another assault. But the soldier did not heed them.

CHAPTER XI.

THE GLADIATOR'S LAST STRUGGLE.

BUT, through their ignorance of what had occurred upon the top of the *mesa*, the Apaches allowed the golden moment to pass by, unimproved, when one more effort would assuredly have gained them the reward of their desperate and unusually persistent endeavors.

Their yells, then, were not the charging-cry renewed, but had a far different significance. Peculiar cries had attracted their attention toward the pass by which they had entered the circular valley. Several of their comrades were just entering; those who had been dispatched after the missing couple of pale-faces. The efforts of these, at least, must have been rewarded with success; such was the gratifying thought that filled the mind of each Apache.

The reader knows, however, that in this hope they were fated to bitter disappointment. Indeed, the Apaches, though their game was safely brought to bay, required reinforcements. One assault had met with a bloody loss; but, sooner or later the hated pale-face must succumb to the indomitable courage and prowess of the Apache.

Thus, their party divided, one portion investing the canyon-pass, the other surrounding the square-topped *mesa*, the Apaches seemed resolved to await the slower but more sure result of thirst and starvation. And thus the night rolled silently on.

All was silent as death upon the *mesa* top. Not a breath, not a rustle came to the watchful Apaches, to tell them of their anticipated prey, not a sound came to their keenly strained ears.

As the gray light of day dawned over the valley, the gaze of all was eagerly directed toward the rock. Already the Apaches were canvassing another attempt—another scaling-party; but fortunately, perhaps, for all concerned, this project was abandoned.

First one keen-eyed savage detected a faint, irregular patch of mud-like vapor just above the *mesa* top, and then all shrewdly guessed the truth. The vapor was smoke curling from the pipe of the pale-face. And their half-formed resolve quietly died away.

The Apaches were correct in their surmise. At that moment the soldier, Tom Day, sat upon the rock above, a short pipe in his mouth, a revolver at half-cock in one hand, while the other rested lightly upon the head that was pillowed upon his lap. His face was pale and jaded, bearing but too plainly the marks of deep anxiety and suffering; but the wild, dazed look of despair had fled from his eyes.

For Edith Bland was not dead—was now sleeping peacefully, trustfully, unharmed in body.

As she beheld the horrible sight—the dread result of her action, in the quivering corpse of the Apache, a revulsion came, and she swooned. Thus Tom had found her; and for fully an hour he had believed her dead. Then she faintly stirred in his arms, her eyes opened, and she feebly murmured his name.

Over that period of almost heavenly joy, draw a veil. Words are powerless to paint such.

But now Tom Day sat gloomily weighing the chances of their future. They were small—if indeed there was any hope. Already he was tortured with thirst and faint with hunger. Added to this was now a weary longing for sleep. More than once his head drooped and his lids closed; but manfully he fought back the temptation. To yield, even for a single moment might be death—for his loved one as well as himself.

"Sleep on, poor girl!" he muttered, huskily, as he gently smoothed the masses of disheveled, silken hair. "Sleep on—the longer the better. It may be your last chance. Hunger and thirst will soon kill you—even if those devils remain quiet. Oh! if the clouds would only come!"

But his eye detected no hope from this quarter, as he eagerly scanned the horizon by the rapidly increasing light of day. And a bitter lament broke from his lips, as he knew that in another hour they would be exposed to the full rays of the torrid sun. The end could not long be protracted, since they had no water.

But we need not dwell upon the long hours of that day; the subject is not a pleasant one. The sufferings of the lovers were terrible, as the full force of the glowing sun fell upon their unprotected heads; yet, strange as it may appear, the

strong man suffered by far the more acutely. A truly invaluable treasure Tom Day now found the pint flask of whisky that he usually carried in his breast pocket "for medicine in case of accidents." Only for that, they must have given way. Its subtle strength sustained their sinking spirits.

Thus the long day wore on, and night once more came over the valley. The Apaches made no regular attack, though an occasional arrow was shot over the *mesa*, or at such an angle that it descended upon the flat top. Tom had snatched a brief sleep in the afternoon, and felt greatly refreshed as the cool night breeze sprung up.

A dull, heavy silence sprung over the valley as the night wore on. All seemed wrapped in slumber. With Edith's head again pillowed upon his lap, Tom Day gradually yielded to sleep, and then the *mesa* was left unguarded.

The indistinct reports of fire-arms failed to arouse him; indistinct, because the ragged hills multiplied their echoes a thousand times. And the Apaches below began to stir, their excitement growing momentarily more and more intense. A couple of warriors suddenly appeared in their midst, and in a few hasty words communicated news of evident interest. The loud voice of their chief broke the silence, and in obedience to his orders a number of warriors hastened away toward the mouth of the pass.

And through all this the soldier slept peacefully.

The light of day was breaking in the east. Already outlines were tolerably distinct. Phantom-like, the dusky Apaches were gathering around the base of the *mesa*. In their eyes glowed a deadly determination; from their hard, stern-set faces one could tell that they had resolved upon success—even though half their forces must first feel the hand of death.

And then the dark figures began to scale the face of the *mesa*, clinging to the points of rock, digging their moccasined toes into the holes and crevices, carrying keen blades tightly clinched betwixt their teeth. All was silence above. Not a breath—not a rustle gave token that the pale-face was upon his guard and ready to give them a hot reception.

The foremost Apache grasped the edge of the rock and drew himself bodily upward. He saw a dark figure crouching upon the rock, with outstretched arm; but then the light of life was forever quenched in his eyes. A blinding flash—a sharp report, and the Apaches knew that the pale-face was awaiting their coming.

The faint noise of the ascent had aroused Edith, and she had awakened the soldier.

In quick succession the Apaches scaled the rock, but the deadly revolvers spoke quite as rapidly. One after another the assailants reel and fall back, until the rock base is thickly strewn with the dead and disabled. Still the survivors press on. They are wild, mad; nothing but human blood can quench their thirst.

Chamber after chamber is quickly emptied. Each shot claims a life. Yet others spring up to take the place of the fallen. And then an involuntary cry of dismay broke from the soldier's lips, as the hammer falls twice upon the uncovered nipples. His last pistol was empty—he is utterly defenseless—and still the Apaches

swarm on and up the rock face, dragging their bodies over the escarpment, yelling like fiends incarnate.

And with his naked hands, Tom leaps forward.

This was the sound that caused Mustang Sam to pause so abruptly in his impetuous charge upon the Apaches—the sound of rapid firing, mingled with the charging yells, the death-shrieks of the Apaches. The almost incredible truth seemed to burst upon his mind as if by instinct, and he loudly yelled:

"My head ag'inst a petrified pigtail that's the soldier feller still fightin' the ho'nets! On—fol-ler me, boys! We'll cheat the or'nary varmints yit!"

With wild cheers the emigrants, thoroughly infected by his reckless daring, closely pressed after Mustang Sam. A moment more and the result of the thumping, clattering sound was before them.

A barricade of jagged rocks and bowlders completely choked up the mouth of the pass that led into the circular valley. Already the barricade was breast high, and Apaches were still adding to it.

"Now—don't stop or we're played!" yelled Mustang, gathering himself together. "Don't give 'em time to fire—do as I do an' the varmints air ours!"

Even as the angry yell told that the savages had discovered their approach, Mustang Sam darted forward, unchecked by the storm of rifle-bullets and arrows that were poured from the barricade. Like a bird he rose into the air, fairly clearing the pile of rocks, alighting safely upon his feet in the very midst of the startled and bewildered red-skins.

Striking desperately out, right and left, Mustang Sam cleared himself sufficiently to draw his revolvers. And then the deadly weapons began to play, before the Apaches could cast off the amazement that seized upon them at this marvelous feat of strength and skill.

"On, boys! Giv' them the best you've got!" screamed Mustang Sam, fairly mad with excitement, as the foremost emigrants began clambering over the barricade.

A horrible, deadly *melee* followed. The changes were too rapid for the human eye to follow. The struggle too exciting and thrilling—too deadly and furious for words to describe. It was like the horrible, breathless death-grapple of two-score wild savage beasts pressed up together with no mode of escape by flight—where death could only be avoided by slaying. It was soul-sickening.

Scarcely a minute elapsed from the first shot, until all was over at that point—the battle fought, the victory won. The defeated—the few who had escaped immediate death or disabling wounds—were in full flight down the pass leading into the circular valley.

"On—it's only begun—thar's more devils down yender!" cried Mustang Sam, dashing the hot blood from his eyes; a long gash seaming his skull and forehead. "Quick! we'll be too late to help our friends!"

Close upon the heels of the flying savages dashed the emigrants. Ten seconds carried them

to the edge of the valley. An involuntary cry broke from Mustang's lips:

"Good God! look yender!"

The *mesa* was surrounded by savages, some alive, others dead or else writhing horribly in the last agonies. Some were still scaling the rock; and half a dozen figures stood boldly outlined upon the top.

A single man was battling against these fearful odds.

As the emigrants burst into view of this wild scene, they saw a slight form spring forward to the side of the soldier, and heard, even above the horrible din, two quick reports. It was Edith, who had hurriedly reloaded the revolver first discharged, and now, thoughtless of self, only seeing the imminent peril of her lover, she came nobly to his rescue.

"Yell, boys, to tell 'em we're comin'!" cried Mustang, setting the example, and then the valley was filled with the loud, ringing cheer as the rescuers sped forward.

It had the desired effect. The Apaches heard and saw the new foe, and fear magnified their numbers. Little yells of dismay filled the air.

Tom Day also heard the unmistakable sound, and it nerved his nearly exhausted powers. Clutching his antagonist with a giant's gripe, he raised his feet clear of the rock and hurled him headlong over the edge. At the same moment Edith fired again, with deadly aim. And totally dismayed, the surviving two Apaches turned and leaped madly from the rock.

Panting, breathless, the soldier sunk down, his brain reeling, almost dead. Forgetting all else, Edith dropped her weapon and caught his sinking form in her arms.

Down in the valley all was confusion. The terror-stricken Apaches flung aside their weapons and every thing that could serve to incumber them, and fled in every direction, closely followed by the maddened emigrants, whose deadly revolvers played rapidly. Not one thought was given to mercy.

An hour later all was over, and the valley was deserted by all save the dead. Mustang Sam passed word for the two men who had been left upon the further side of the canyon, to hasten back to the animals, and take them to the spur of rocks. Then, with the two girls carried upon the rude litters, the party slowly made their way through the hills. Tom Day, though faint with the loss of blood, was yet only slightly hurt, and, refreshed with food and drink, managed to keep pace with the rest.

"Yet, despite the double rescue and reunion, it was a sad, gloomy and dispirited party, for all now knew the worst; that their families were murdered and their teams destroyed, leaving them almost in the heart of the desert.

The horses were regained, and then led by Mustang, the party soon found themselves beside a beautiful spring, where they determined to encamp for the time being.

CHAPTER XII.

"PLAYED OUT" AND A "STAG" DANCE.

To set all possible doubts at rest, Mustang Sam soon after rode out of the encampment upon the black stallion, and galloped swiftly

toward the point from whence had risen the tell-tale light. But little the worse for the wounds—or scratches, as he himself termed them—that he had received during the valley fight, the dashing plainsman kept every sense upon the full alert. He felt that, in a measure, the lives of the small remnant of the emigrants depended upon his skill and coolness, since he alone knew aught of the desert waste that surrounded them.

Mustang Sam was scarcely disappointed when he came within fair view of the *mesa*, and distinguished the blackened and charred remains of the train, together with the white, dismembered bones that alone remained to tell the tragic tale. It was nothing more than he had expected.

"But the Apaches—where were they? A question soon answered, and most disagreeably, too. A keen glance around showed Mustang an indistinct clump, far distant, riding rapidly toward the *mesa*. That they were Indians, he could not doubt.

The bold plainsman felt assured that he could pass by before the Apaches could fairly intercept him. It was a narrow shave, but Tornado did not fail his master, and an hour later Mustang Sam rode into camp.

"That's only one hope. We're on the main trail now. A train may come along strong enough to whip these varmints. But we can't wait for it—so I'm goin' to ride out an' hurry it up, while you fellers hold this place."

The project seemed little short of suicide. The Apaches were upon every side. How could a horseman pass them?

To all remonstrances, Mustang Sam replied with a gay, careless laugh. His mind was set, and nothing but death could alter his determination.

He leaped upon Comanche's back, leading Tornado by a stout horse-hair halter, secured to his shoulder. Then, with a revolver drawn and cocked in either hand, he rode forth, swiftly as the career of the dreaded norther.

For a moment the Apaches seemed at a loss, but then, as one man, they flocked to intercept the fugitive. Their rifles and bows began to speak, mingled with the revolvers of the Mad Rider. Comanche reared high in the air, uttering an almost human shriek of agony. His race was run. One mad bound—then he fell to the sands, dead.

But Mustang Sam? As the cloud of dust arose, he was seen racing swiftly away, safely astride Tornado, having leaped from the death-stricken Comanche just in the nick of time.

The day and night passed slowly, wearily enough to the jaded, hard-beset emigrants. Scarce an hour passed by without some annoyance from the Apaches, who, however, seemed fearful of coming into direct collision. They were waiting for reinforcements.

But they waited too long for the success of their revenge. By noon of the second day, they suddenly took to flight. A cloud of dust in the distance explained this. It marked the return of Mustang Sam, accompanied by a score of sturdy "boys in blue." He had found a government train upon the trail, and the commanding officer at once set out to the rescue.

The remnant of the emigrants were accommodated as the train came up. Under convoy of the soldiers, they had nothing more to fear, and safely reached their destination.

Acting upon the advice of his lady-love's father, Tom Day resigned his commission, and joined Mr. Bland upon his mining claim. In the same mine labored Ella's father and Arthur Hamilton.

A month after their arrival, "Skunk Hollow"—as the valley was euphoniously named by the pioneer miners from the abundance of those sweet-scented animals—was the scene of a grand double-wedding; every man knocked off work, and golden gifts fairly flooded our friends, from the enthusiastic miners. To the ecstatic wailing of a cracked fiddle, the red-shirted miners lumbered around in the voluptuous "stag-dance," for Edith and Ella were the only women at the Hollow.

But the reader must imagine the rest.

Mustang Sam was there—and got "gloriously drunk on the occasion," too. Then he vanished—returned once more to the wild life, a glimpse of which we have laid before the reader.

THE END.

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